

# 10 TEN DETECTIVE

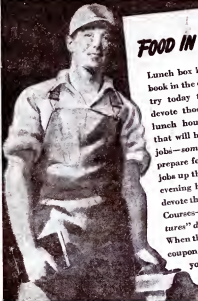


**THE MURDER OF  
JACKIE ROBINSON**

WHY DID HE GET  
KILLED? A MURDERER'S  
MOTIVE

**THE MURDER OF JAMES EARL RAY**

THE MURDER OF THE  
PRESIDENT'S SON  
THE MURDER OF THE PRESIDENT'S SON



## FOOD IN BOTH HANDS!

Lunch box in one hand, I.C.S. textbook in the other—all over this country today there are men who will devote those extra moments at the lunch hour to learning something that will help them on their present jobs—something that will help them prepare for the bigger, better paying jobs up the ladder. At home, in those evening hours, these ambitious men devote themselves to mastery of I.C.S. Courses—they know that their "futures" depend upon their "presents"! When they realized it, they mailed the coupon of progress that now stares you in the face!

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# 10¢ TEN DETECTIVE ACES 10 STORIES 10¢

A. A. WYN  
Editor

HARRY WIDMER,  
Managing Editor



MARCH, 1938

Vol. XXXII, No. 1

## Ten New, Different Stories—No Serials!

1. **MURDERERS' REBELLION** (Novel) . . . Russell Bender 10  
*Investigator Shag Roberts was caught in a killer's whirlpool. And ever his head the waters were turning red.*
2. **FORTY GRAND FADEOUT** . . . Benton Braden 31  
*When he stuck his neck out too far, the G-man entered a golden trap.*
3. **RIVER RAT'S COMEBACK** . . . S. J. Bailey 39  
*The only person who could help the kid was a cop in whom he had lost faith.*
4. **PUPPET BOSS OF DESTINY** . . . Ernest Bean 50  
*He was a perfect butler—but he knew more than was good for him.*
5. **DEATH IS TOO EASY** (Novelet) . . . Arthur J. Burks 54  
*A famous detective had to learn that death is too easy an out.*
- In the April **TEN DETECTIVE ACES** . . . 72
6. **CATTY CORNERED** ("Dizzy Duo" Yarn) . . . Joe Archibald 73  
*Snoopy Piper tries to prove that "volts" are not for women.*
7. **A SUCKER A DAY** (Novelty Feature) . . . Convict 12627 82  
*A knife hunter gets rich—without letting blood from his victims.*
8. **FIVE CENTS A LIFE** . . . Maitland Scott 85  
*Tight-spot Andrews figured his life was worth at least a nickel.*
9. **ONE HUNCH TO HELL** . . . Richard A. Vigil 93  
*That monkey farm held a score of chattering alibis.*
10. **YOU CAN'T MINCE HOMICIDE** . . . Robert S. Fenton 99  
*Detective Toller knew that murder and baseball were strange bedfellows.*

Cover by Norman Saunders

**This is an ACE MAGAZINE—See Page 8**

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**YES- I'M CONVINCED**  
THAT I CAN MAKE GOOD  
MONEY IN RADIO.  
I'M GOING TO START  
TRAINING FOR RADIO  
RIGHT NOW.



**NO- NOT ME.**  
I'M NOT GOING TO WASTE  
MY TIME. SUCCESS IS  
JUST A MATTER OF  
LUCK AND I WASN'T  
BORN LUCKY.

BILL SAID  
"YES"  
HE'S MAKING  
GOOD MONEY  
IN RADIO  
NOW



THIS N.R.I. TRAINING  
IS GREAT, AND THEY  
SENT REAL RADIO  
PARTS TO HELP  
ME LEARN  
QUICKLY

YOU CERTAIN  
KNOW RADIO.  
HOW NEVER  
SOUNDED  
BETTER.

I'VE BEEN STUDYING RADIO  
ONLY A FEW MONTHS AND  
I'M ALREADY MAKING  
GOOD MONEY IN  
MY SPARE  
TIME

THANKS

OH WELL! I'M  
SO PROUD OF  
YOU, YOU'VE  
GONE AHEAD  
SO FAST IN  
RADIO

YES! I'VE GOT A  
GOLD JOB NOW AND  
A REAL FUTURE.  
THANKS TO  
N.R.I. TRAINING



TOM SAID  
"NO"  
HE'S STILL  
WAITING  
FOR "LUCK"



BILL'S A SNAKE TO WASTE  
HIS TIME STUDYING  
RADIO AT HOME



SAME OLD GRIND--  
SAMS GIVING PAY  
ENVELOPE-- I'M  
JUST YEARS &  
WAS FIVE YEARS  
AGO

WHEN I'M A  
FAILURE--  
LOOKS LIKE  
I'LL NEVER  
GET ANYWHERE

YOU'LL ALWAYS BE  
A FAILURE, TOM.  
UNLESS YOU DO SOME-  
THING ABOUT IT.  
WHEN YOU WAITING  
WON'T GET YOU  
ANYWHERE

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National Radio Institute  
Est. 1914

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time Radio set serv-  
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as \$100 to \$150 a  
week. Full time serv-  
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Radio manufacturers and dealers supply test-  
ing, repairs, repairs, customers, servicemen,  
service up to \$1,000 a year. Radio operators  
on ships get good pay, see the world  
besides. Automobile, petrol, ap-  
pliance, commercial Radio  
and speaker systems offer  
good opportunities now and  
for the future. Television  
promises money good pay  
now. Men I trained at home  
now find jobs in all these  
branches of Radio.

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J. E. SMITH, President  
National Radio Institute, Dept. 8C4S  
Washington, D. C.

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CITY ..... STATE .....

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NOW!

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Washington, D. C.



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28x4.40	\$2.15	28x4.40	\$2.15	28x4.40	\$2.15	28x4.40	\$2.15
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28x4.40	\$2.15	28x4.40	\$2.15	28x4.40	\$2.15	28x4.40	\$2.15

## HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES

Size	Price	Size	Price	Size	Price	Size	Price
30x6.00	\$3.15	30x6.00	\$3.15	30x6.00	\$3.15	30x6.00	\$3.15
30x6.00	\$3.15	30x6.00	\$3.15	30x6.00	\$3.15	30x6.00	\$3.15
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30x6.00	\$3.15	30x6.00	\$3.15	30x6.00	\$3.15	30x6.00	\$3.15

## TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Price	Size	Price	Size	Price	Size	Price
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30x6.00	\$3.15	30x6.00	\$3.15	30x6.00	\$3.15	30x6.00	\$3.15
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which are helping thousands who  
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this consulting membership as per order above.

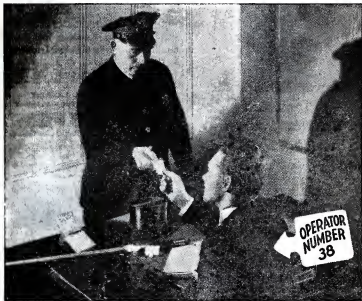
Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
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Send letter today, complete and send our address of an-  
nounce that of at least one business man as follows:

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Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

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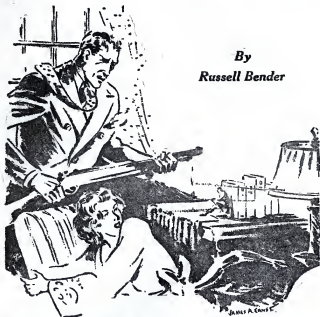
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# Murderers' Rebellion

By  
Russell Bender



*Murder is a whirlpool. This one started slowly, but when it gathered impetus, many lives were engulfed in its swirling current. Investigator Shag Roberts wanted no part of it, but he was caught in the maelstrom of too many cross-currents. And now the waters were running over his head—turning crimson red.*

## CHAPTER I

### OVERTURE FOR MURDER

I GOT A FIST shoved under my nose on my next to last call, collected six bucks on my last. Ten minutes later, at four twenty-five, I parked my coupé

on Bladensburg Road, loafed into the Purple Cat Inn.

Edward, the barman, said: "How's the small-loan business?"

"Okay." I headed toward a phone booth at the end of the bar, caught a short beer on the way. When I got the office,

*Sensational  
Detective  
Novel*



Janey, our redheaded stenographer, said:  
"Not Shaughnessy Roberts?"

I'm always kidded about that first name. I said: "The same."

"Just a minute. The boss is busy."

I had just time to push open the door and get Edward to slide me another beer before the boss' voice said:

"Get in here, Roberts."

I came to life. "Get in there! Look. I'm over here every night until six-thirty, working myself to the death, and—"

"Can it. I worked Washington myself once. I'll give six to one you've finished your last call already." I didn't take him up. "But get in here, Shag. All the brass hats are down, from Cromwell up, and

*Astounded she shoved  
out the gun, fired.*

there's something about a suicide, a murder, or an accidental death, or something. Get in here."

I said weakly: "Okay."

I hung up and had another beer . . .

Cromwell, the district supervisor, was a Canadian, a medium-sized man with clear gray eyes, firm muscles in his face,

and plenty of restraint about him. He had dignity, but not too much; and he had vigor, which was used quietly. I'd always liked him. The rest of the brass hats weren't so hot, and I passed my opinion along to Bones McPherson, who agreed. My breath reeked with an assortment of breath-killers. Bones beld his nose, whispered, "How many did you have—to make you take all that?" and Cromwell said:

"If you'll just stop talking a moment, Mr. McPherson, we'll start . . . There . . . Now, did you fellows know that our district has been floored out of six thousand dollars?"

All of us outside men were arranged in an irregular semi-circle in front of the brass hats—the girls were gone—and every one of us looked surprised, even if we weren't. This didn't sound like suicide, murder, or accidental death to me. Cromwell let his gray eyes roam over us for a moment—to let the full import of his news sink in, I suppose — then cleared his throat and went on:

"None of that six thousand dollars was gotten in this office. Altogether, there were twenty loans, each three hundred dollars, and they were spread all over our district—New York, Albany, Newark, Philadelphia, to mention only a few, and the other two Baltimore offices. All the loans were gotten by the same two people, who assumed the names of actual married couples who were away from their homes on vacation trips. We've had handwriting experts verify that by comparing all of the fake signatures. And we've concluded that the man and woman who got the loans knew every in and out of our system in making loans.

"So we've had a lot of trouble, principally placating the people whose names the loans were secured under, and who we insisted should prove the forgery to us. Besides a couple of threatened suits, we've gotten some bad publicity. And that hurts business, naturally. Not that we'll be bothered with the same hoax by the same two people, because an outside man in Philadelphia got an address here in Baltimore on them, and just before we

arrived, four hours later, the man was found dead. We think the death was accidental.

"Anyway, we discovered that the woman had been away for several days—and she may have left the man who was found dead, may work the racket with some one else. You see, she doesn't know we're wise to her, or that we even suspect her. And at Mr. Reynolds' suggestion—" he smiled at the Eastern supervisor—"although I insisted on going in the house and stealing the picture myself, we have a picture of her and we'll pass out reproductions.

"Our job now is to locate her before she causes us any more trouble. The point is this, you see: we don't want to prosecute the woman. We don't want to publicize how easy it is to cheat us out of three hundred dollars. We have to find that woman, let her know we're on to her, and scare her so much she'll never try it again. And maybe collect our six thousand. Do I make myself clear?"

EVERYONE looked grave, and he continued: "The reason we're holding the meeting in this office is that we believe that the woman is living somewhere in this office's territory. All of this is, of course, confidential, and none of you shall mention it to anyone outside the company. But, Mr. McPherson — " he levelled a finger at Bones—"we believe the woman is living in your territory. Mr. Roberts—" he switched the finger to me—"we believe we can locate her through her brother, who lives in your territory. We'll pass out reproductions of that picture and everybody can keep their eyes open. Any questions?"

I didn't hear any. The Canuck sat down, the room began to buzz with conversation, the boss got up and began passing out the reproductions. I got up and said:

"You said you thought the man's death was accidental. Aren't you sure?"

The room was suddenly quiet again. The boss stopped passing out the pictures; one of the brass hats forgot to light his pipe. I could feel the Eastern supervisor staring at me.

The Canuck gave me one of those soft smiles. "No, we're not, Mr. Roberts. Not sure, at all. Why?"

I shrugged.

He said: "If it does turn out that the man was murdered, wouldn't you want to make an investigation?"

I said: "Would you?"

"No."

I knew I'd been right about liking that guy. He was strictly on the level. I said to him: "I wouldn't either, Mr. Cromwell. I don't mind admitting I'd be scared as hell, and I don't mind saying I don't think it'd be fair. We're not getting paid to investigate murders. That's dangerous business, and—"

Cromwell rubbed his straight Canuck nose. "You're right, Mr. Roberts. We all know it's dangerous business, and we're not ordering anybody to go into it. We're asking for volunteers. We mentioned your name and Mr. McPherson's because we believe the woman is in his territory, and we know her brother happens to be in yours. But if you want to refuse, it won't go against your record in any way. Not in the slightest. We leave it up to you."

He was quite grave. I thought for a moment, stalled for time, tried to get a clear perspective on the entire mess. And somehow I believed that Canuck. The quiet, reasonable tone of his voice gave me confidence; I was convinced that if I refused, he'd see to it that nothing detrimental would happen to my record. But I knew that something would happen to his opinion of me. Nothing that he'd ever allow himself to show, I was quite sure; but something, just the same. Not contempt, or disgust, exactly; but something with a shade of both.

Why I wanted that guy to like me, I don't know.

I said: "Well, I don't want to, Mr. Cromwell. But I will."

I didn't know what I was getting into . . .

The murder story broke in the papers the next morning—it developed that the address the man in Philly had gotten was

in Towson, which is just outside of Baltimore—and I read the story over bacon and eggs in a cafeteria.

It was pretty interesting. The murdered man's name was James, Francis T. James, and he had lived in Towson all his life. And there wasn't anything shady about his reputation. He was a contractor, in business for himself, and known to everybody as honest, reliable, a man who did good work. Three years ago his wife had died of pneumonia. Two months ago he had turned up with a new wife. Immediately, they'd gone away on a honeymoon. And returned last Saturday . . . this was Friday. But his new wife had gone away again on Tuesday.

And nobody seemed to know where she'd gone. Also his daughter, Virginia, who'd stayed home while they honeymooned, had disappeared on Thursday. That was the day the man was killed. The reporters waxed eloquent on the mystery.



OVER A SECOND CUP of coffee, I studied the mechanics of the murder. It had been cleverly done, I thought. James was found in his living-room, where he was sitting on the sofa apparently cleaning his pistol; and it looked as though the gun had gone off while he was oiling the trigger, and had shot him through the head.

But the detectives, overjoyed at a chance to try the new paraffin test, discovered that James didn't fire the gun. This, however, led to a hell of an argument. Some said if it went off accidentally, what difference did it make whether he had held it—gripped it like anybody would have gripped it, that is—or not? Others said that if the gun went off in his hands, no matter how he was holding it, the paraffin test would show some embedded powder somewhere. None of them seemed to know a hell of a lot about it.

An expert was called down from New York, but before he could get here the

doubt was settled. It seems that the only fingerprints on the gun were the murdered man's; in explanation, the detectives said the murderer's had been wiped off. Then, according to them, the gun, handled with a rag that had obviously been used in cleaning it, had been put into the murdered man's hand so as to put his prints on it. In other words, the murderer had planned the entire setup, and James hadn't been cleaning the gun at all.

And the detective's great point was this: there were no prints on the oilcan that was near the body. And the gun had been oiled. So the detectives said the murderer had oiled the gun, wiped his own prints from the oilcan, and either overlooked the importance of putting his victim's prints on the oilcan, or simply forgotten to do it. And they were yelling to the skies that there was a colored boy in the woodpile.

I grinned. I dragged out the reproduction they'd given me of the picture Cromwell had snatched, looked that over. It was surprising how plain and honest the woman looked. She was about forty, I judged, with dark hair and dark eyes and a sweet, simple expression. She looked like life had been pretty good to her. In a lower corner was an inscription: *To Jimmie, the best James ever. From Mother.* I frowned, lit a cigarette, put the reproduction back in my pocket.

Bones McPherson drifted in at five of eight. He was tall, skinny, and with a lot of freckles; but his dress was Broadway, and he was neat, well-groomed. He had orange juice and coffee, then leaned over and said:

"I don't like this messing around with murder, and if you refuse, I will. What the hell changed your mind all of a sudden, anyway?"

I said I didn't know.

He crooked a finger at the coffee girl. "Hey, you! More Java! Do your sleeping nights!" Nobody ever accused Bones of being tactful. Then he growled at me: "If you're just showing off in front of the brass hats, I ought to break your neck."

"I don't think that's the case, Bones."

"No, I know it isn't." He dumped three spoons of sugar in his coffee, bellowed for more cream. "No, I know damned well it isn't. But the trouble with you is that you're a good guy who's pretty sensible one minute and screwy as hell the next. I can never figure you out. You know what I thought you were at first?"

I shook my head.

"You won't like it."

"Let me have it anyway."

He said: "See? You're a good guy now. Sensible. You know I won't mean anything by it." He hesitated. "I thought you were a rich man's son."

I laughed. "I rather like that."

"Well, I wouldn't. I wouldn't want any guy to think I was a playboy living on my old man's dough. Every time I ever saw you around, you were dressed up like a million and squiring a different dame." He looked me over. "That damned baby face of yours fools people."

I grinned at him.

He said thoughtfully: "A tough guy with a baby face—that's you, all right. And sensible one minute, screwy as hell the next." He wagged his head as if he didn't quite understand.

**WE** WENT up to the office. The Canuck was there, but none of the brass hats, and when we came in he was sitting behind the boss' desk, toying absently with a letter-opener. And it occurred to me that this was the first time I had seen him when he wasn't actually doing something—either talking quietly to one of the men or looking over one of the office records. He wasn't the kind who wasted time.

He said, "Good morning," to us very gravely, and I noticed a morning paper folded by his elbow. And he kept on sitting there, turning the letter-opener over and over. When we were putting our hats in the coat room, Bones whispered:

"What's eating him?"

I said: "I'll tell you what you do. You spend eighteen years with the company, get to be district supervisor, then have

something like this murder business threaten to knock your job out from under you. Who do you think the bigger brass hats are blaming?"

Bones wrinkled his freckled nose. "Cromwell?"

I said, "Not you, you skinny ape," and left him and went to do my daily report. It was fully a half hour later when Cromwell beckoned at Bones and me with a sinewed finger. He led us into a small private office—we call them deal rooms—and closed the door behind us. Blanchard, the boss, was already in there. He's a jolly little man, but explosive as hell, and has a mop of kinky hair and tiny hands and feet. He likes pretty girls around him. He always hires girls with plenty of body; but that doesn't stop him from firing them if they can't do the work. Every time he has a job to fill, Bones and I bet on the number he'll hire and fire. Blanchard winked at me, and I winked back at him.

Cromwell said: "I suppose you've read the morning papers." He was addressing Bones and me. "And you, Mr. Blanchard?"

We all nodded.

"Well, in view of the circumstances—if the woman murdered him—you can see we're up against some one who's pretty clever. Now. When I found out yesterday that the man James was dead, I checked with a few of the larger insurance companies. Luckily, he had a policy with the fourth one Mr. Reynolds and I tried. Five thousand dollars. His beneficiary is his daughter, Virginia, and the policy was taken out six months ago. I talked to the salesman. He knew the family fairly well, had dated the daughter several times. He said that Mrs. James had a brother who worked for the government in Washington.

"It seems that this brother—his name's Alfred Spaulding—had also dated the daughter several times. That's how the salesman happened to hear about him—through the daughter. Spaulding used to come over to Baltimore to see her about twice a week.

"The salesman never met him. He couldn't give me any description, and he couldn't tell me what department of the government Spaulding worked for. So it'll be a fairly tedious job locating him, and it might take one man a lot of time. Therefore, I'm sending both of you over." He looked quickly at Bones and me.

"I want you two to understand thoroughly that we're quite pressed for time. The cops might pick up the same information any day—and we want to get to this woman, Mrs. James, before they do. I think it's quite clear why. If the cops get to her first and indict her for murder—she might have slipped back to Towson and killed the man, you know—it would be highly improbable for us to contact her without getting publicity. On the other hand, with the threat of turning her over to the cops to use as a collection lever, if we get there before they do, we might even collect our six thousand. All of this is taking right much for granted—still, it's a thought."

He stopped, smiled.

Blanchard, worrying about the record of the office as usual, asked: "Will they do any other work?"

"No. Their regular stuff can wait."

I was writing down Spaulding's name. Blanchard strutted over, put his hands on his hips, squared off cockily in front of Bones and me. The boss is your bosom friend until his own record is threatened.

"Now, listen. You two learned the small-loan business under me. I don't want you to call in or come back and say you can't find him."

Cromwell said quietly: "They'll find him."

He sounded as though he was afraid we would.

Outside, when I got my coupé started, Bones looked at me curiously and said: "Say! Don't you think it's funny that none of those screwy loans were gotten in our office?"

I said: "You're damned right I do."

There was plenty about the whole mess that looked funny to me.



## CHAPTER II

### BOOMERANG RUSE



**A** CHECK-UP on all the government departments is tedious, as Cromwell said; but Bones and I were pretty

lucky. We each took a phone booth at Pennsylvania Station, kidded the operators there—who dial your number for you—into getting the personnel branch of each department, then kidded them further into saying: "Here's your party." Then we would say it was Cleveland or Des Moines or St. Louis calling, and thus get quicker and more efficient service. There is something imperative about a long distance call. We found an Alfred Spaulding in the government accounting office after only forty minutes in the two booths.

I was on the line. I said: "No, I don't want to talk to him. I want to send him some papers in relation to an insurance claim." Then I thanked the girl, hung up, and hustled Bones out of the station.

We found a parking spot on Eleventh near H, and I said: "I think it'll be safer if we tackle him one at a time. Then if one fails, we won't be stymied; the other guy can try another idea. Besides, two of us might scare him. Got any suggestions?"

"Have you?"

"One." I brought out cigarettes and Bones refused one; he always refused mine. That was one of the good things you could say about him; he certainly wasn't a chiseler. I lit mine, held a match for one of his, said: "It's the old one I pull when I'm looking up any 'skip' with a grown daughter. You know—look cowed, say we're engaged. I'm not bad at it."

"Bragging again."

"But I'm not bad at it. I was engaged once, and the lovely took a powder. I remember how I used to moon around. I want to try it."

"We better call in first."

"The hell with that," I said. "They've probably thought of something they think would be better. Blanchard's always telling you things to do that fit his personality. I know what I can do with this baby face."

I got out of the car. Bones walked with me down to G Street, went in a drug store to have a coke and wait. I strolled on, passed the three entrances to the building that are on Eleventh Street, turned around and strolled back again. I was trying to decide which entrance had the most friendly looking guard. Finally I chose one—the guard was a slight fellow with false teeth which he didn't mind showing when he grinned. I walked up to him briskly, went into my song-and-dance.

The guards at the government buildings in Washington want to let you in. They don't want to argue; that's a hell of a lot of trouble. I said: "I want to see a friend of mine. I'm just passing through from Cleveland—" That's always enough. Tell them you're from out of town and their faces actually brighten. They consider that a truly legitimate excuse.

This one moved away to call my man downstairs, muttering: "Spaulding, Spaulding . . ."

I called after him: "The first name's Alfred."

Alfred Spaulding came down in a few minutes, I had no description of him, nor any idea of what he looked like; but the minute he stepped out of the elevator and glanced around the lobby with a puzzled look, I knew it was he. The guard was nearby, so I moved forward, tried to get between Spaulding and the guard so the guard wouldn't see the lack of recognition in Spaulding's face. You can't be too flagrant with those guys.

I said: "Al! Al, you old goat! How you been?"

I was pumping his hand and edging him around a bend in the corridor before he even had a chance to say a word.

When he did have a chance, he jerked his hand away from mine and said: "Have you gone entirely crazy, or is your natural stupidity so great that you can't

tell one person from another?" Then: "Who are you? Who do you think you're talking to?"

I said hurriedly: "I'm Virginia James' fiancé, and I'm talking to Alfred Spaulding, her step-mother's brother. Does that make sense?"

He said: "You're what?"

I told him again.

His eyes almost bulged out of his head.

I WAITED THEN, looked him over. I felt it would be better for me not to force the issue, and I wanted to size him up a little. Somehow, I'd expected a middle-aged businessman, shrewd and brusque. Alfred Spaulding wasn't like that at all. He was young, not over thirty, with a large frame that was carrying at least one hundred and ninety pounds. He wore a brown gabardine suit, beautifully tailored. But he wasn't very neat. The suit needed pressing badly, and I judged his shoes hadn't been shined for a week. You couldn't imagine him wearing a topcoat without turning up the collar.

He was staring at me like he had gone nuts. He asked hoarsely: "Where did you meet Jimmie?"

"Who?"

"Jimmie—Virginia."

I got the connection. I remembered the photo-inscription. I said: "Where did you meet her?"

He boiled. "Now look here! I've had enough of your arrogance and your questions! I've had enough of you! Now, you either tell me what you want or I'll have the guard throw you out!" His voice was ringing through the corridors. "Out! Understand? Out!"

I said docilely: "I hear you."

His neck got positively purple.

"Now, listen," I told him. "I don't want to be thrown out by a guard, and I don't want to offend you." I put the sad, cow-looking in my eyes. "But I love Virginia James. I love her better than anything in the world, and I always will love her. And I'm going to find her. She's in trouble and I'm going to find her. If you won't tell me where she is—well, okay, I'll find her anyway. I'll tell the cops you know where she is. I'll tell them, by heaven,

and they'll find out from you. Then I'll find out from them. Take your choice."

"Of what?"

"Of telling me or telling the cops."

He stuck his face close to mine and said: "I'm not telling you and I'm not telling the police, either. Perhaps I don't even know. But I'm going to the guard and tell him you lied to him. I'm going to have you thrown out of here."

With that, he circled me quickly and started away, his heels drumming on the tiled floor. I could hear his heavy breathing.

I went after him—fast. I caught him after he'd gone about twenty steps, then edged over in front of him, blocked his way.

I said: "Now listen, Spaulding—listen to reason." I was really bearing down now on that sad, cow-look. "I don't want the cops to know where Jimmie is. Don't forget that I'm in love with her—why should I want the cops to grill her? I want to help her—and I've got the dough to do it. And if mine should run out, I can tap my father's. You listen to me, Spaulding. I don't want the cops to know where she is. Hell—I don't even want to see her. I want to help her, that's all. I want to send word to her that I can even get my father's lawyers—"

I could see that all this stuff was slowly getting him. Curiosity had already replaced most of his anger, and he stopped trying to get by me for a moment, studied me narrowly. I waited. Finally he asked:

"Who's your father?"

I said: "Oh, no, you don't! I'm not getting his name mixed up in this until I know where Jimmie is, know we can help her. Listen. It'll be bad enough dragging it in when we're in a position to accomplish something. The old man would have six fits if it was dragged in otherwise."

Spaulding was still studying me narrowly. All of his anger was gone now, and his eyes were cautious, guarded. He said slowly: "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to send her a telegram," I said. "I want you to tell her that my old man and I want to help her. I want you to tell her to get in touch with me."

He flared. "Send her a telegram! So you can get the address from the telegraph office!"

I shrugged. "How else can you get in touch with her?"

He said, owlishly: "I can always write to her, you know." He looked gleeful then; he thought he had me in the middle.

I said: "Okay. Write to her."

"What?"

"Write to her. I know the post office won't give out addresses. Write to her. Let me give you a note to put in the letter. You can read the note. You can mail the letter. Just let me see you mail it, that's all I ask."

"Why do you want to see me mail it?"

I laughed. "I want to stand close to you so I can see the address. Don't be an idiot. I'll stand a block away. I just want to make sure that Jimmie's going to hear from me."

He said slowly: "Are you actually on the level?"

"Sure, I am."

"But—" He pulled viciously at the lobe of his right ear. "Where did you meet Jimmie? How long—"

I said: "For Pete's sake! Let's not start all that again."

"But I don't understand it."

"Hell," I told him, "neither do I. She didn't tell me about you . . . Now, look. You going to write the letter now?"

He looked at his strap-watch. "Can't. Got to get back to work."

"When?"

"Well, I'll write it in the office." He was still tugging at the lobe of that ear. "See you down here at twelve sharp. That's my lunch hour."

I said: "Make it the drug store on the corner. The guards might not let me in here again."

"All right."

He turned and went toward the elevators, and I heeled my way outside.

AT twelve thirty-six, twenty minutes after Spaulding had gone, I watched the mail truck pull in to the curb across the street from the drug store, and saw the postman climb out and begin unlocking the box. Bones pushed the door open,

and I broke into a sprint. I came up to the postman panting, hoping I looked excited, and said:

"Thank heavens I thought I'd missed you!"

The postman looked up and blinked.

I said: "I wrote a letter to my girl, and darned if I can remember whether I put on her old address or her new one." I grinned at him sheepishly.

He began looking through the pile of letters. "What's the name?"

"James. Virginia James."

He pulled a letter from the pile and shoved it toward me. "This it?"

I nodded.

Spaulding had addressed the letter very legibly: *Miss Virginia James, c/o E. F. Rider, Arnold, Md.*

I said: "Whew! All this trouble for nothing. That's right."

The postman was looking over my shoulder. He pushed me suddenly, and screamed: "Look out!"

I don't remember my first reaction. Possibly I ducked; possibly not. But I heard the shot. It cracked out clearly—I'll always hear it—like a solid smash in any ball park. And I heard the slug crash the mail box. It rang metallically, ricocheted. There was the crash of glass next. Some of the fragments nipped the show window of the ladies' shoe shop there on the corner.

Then Bones came loping across the street, yelling: "Come on, Shag! Run!"

I wasn't bewildered. Heaven knows I should have been, but I'm not given to thinking at such moments. I ran. I got ahead of Bones and kept yelling at him: "Damn you! Stretch those legs!"

We went past my car like a couple of Olympic sprinters.

I began to think then. I didn't stop, but swung around, almost dived behind the wheel. Bones piled in beside me. I cut the car around in a sharp U-turn, drew a vicious cussing-out from a swarthy-faced cab driver. At K Street I jumped a red light.

Bones, slightly pale, said: "You're not in Baltimore now. Watch out for these cops."

I nodded. I slowed the car considerably, began obeying most of the traffic laws, alternated with right and left turns for about the next dozen blocks. I was breathing heavily. As I turned into Rhode Island Avenue, and headed out of Washington, I gasped:

"Did—you see the guy who did the shooting?"

Bones shook his head. "The shot came from one of the windows in the accounting office."

"You—sure?"

"Well, I could see everybody who was on the street. None of them did it."

I said: "Ugh!" I was just beginning to wonder how close that shot had come to me; just beginning to wonder where I might be now if the postman hadn't shoved me. I fished out a cigarette with one hand. My stomach felt hollow, and when I got the electric lighter hot, got it out of the dashboard, I couldn't get the end of my cigarette on it. I put the lighter back, threw the cigarette away, watched my hands tremble.

Bones said: "I feel like I got St. Vitus' Dance."

"You weren't shot at."

"I feel like that, anyway. Did you get the address?"

I nodded.

Bones said: "I was afraid of that."

He stared out the window, and his face was long and melancholy.

## CHAPTER III

### SNAKE-EYES



**WE** ATE LUNCH in a barbecue on Washington Boulevard, neither of us eating much, and both of us drinking a lot of beer. We hadn't called in yet.

I knew the natural reaction the office had to any trouble; it was your fault, no matter what you did; you should have handled the situation better. And I was wondering what they'd say to this, despite the fact that we had the address. Of course, it was our fault, or rather

mine, that Spaulding had mailed the letter in that particular box. But I hadn't thought for a moment that the box could be seen from the office windows. To be exact, I hadn't even thought of the windows. But that was carelessness on my part, and the office didn't stand for carelessness.

I said to Bones: "Blanchard'll blast my head off."

"He'll probably fire us both."

"Why you?"

"You told me the scheme, didn't you? I should've thought about the windows, too."

I sighed. Bones was right. We had another bottle of beer apiece, and I went to the end of the bar. There were a pair of phone booths there. I got in one of them, and Bones slipped in the other.

He explained: "To keep some mug from getting in here and hearing what you've got to say."

I closed the doors of my booth tight, gave the operator the number.

Blanchard answered. He said: "Yeah?"

We call in on a private line; that is, the phone book doesn't list the number, I said: "Roberts, Mr. Blanchard. We got the James girl's address."

"You did? Fine!" Blanchard sounded actually pleased. "Fine! Wait a second. Mr. Cromwell wants to talk to you."

I had to wait for quite a long time. Then Cromwell came on and said: "Splendid, Roberts! Where?"

I told him.

He said: "That's really splendid work. How did you get it?"

I told him that, too.

He exclaimed: "Shot at you?"

"Sure as hell he did."

"Hell!"

I waited. I didn't know what to say; the office didn't accept excuses. Then Cromwell's voice came again, cautiously:

"Were either of you hit?"

"No, sir."

"Good." He sounded very relieved. "Did you get away all right?"

"I think so."

"But you aren't sure?"

I said: "We can't be, Mr. Cromwell.

We weren't followed, or stopped by cops, but somebody might have gotten my license number. I don't know whether they did or not."

"I see." He paused. "Well, don't worry about it. If anything comes up, I'll take the responsibility." He paused again. "Do you still want to go on with the investigation?"

My throat felt tight; I couldn't answer. But after I got my throat under control, I hesitated, anyway. I breathed to myself: "Don't be a sucker, Sbag. Don't risk your life because you want to help a guy." And I got the economical end in, too. I breathed: "Don't risk your life for peanuts."

But I said aloud, a half second later: "Sure I want to go on with it."

"Does McPherson?" Cromwell asked.

"Sure he does."

"That's splendid!"

I wasn't sure about that. I was so sore with myself by now that I wasn't sure of anything. I said: "Any instructions?"

"Only to be careful. Try not to get shot, or bit on the head with anything. That's dangerous, too."

I said: "Oh, I don't know. Look at Newton. That bum got conked on the head with an apple—and look what he got out of it."

Then I lifted my right hand and banged up the receiver.

**W**HEN I came out of the booth I didn't tell Bones I'd enlisted him for further duty, too. I didn't tell him much of anything. I led him outside, half dragging him by the arm, got behind the wheel and began to drive like a madman. It took me exactly fifty-seven minutes to get to Arnold. That's travelling, in any man's language; we had to double back to Washington, go out the Defense Highway and through Annapolis. Bones said we went by the Naval Academy so fast it looked like a country schoolhouse. And we went by Arnold, too. But Bones couldn't think of any crack for that. Arnold's so small it's in a class by itself.

That's what we thought.

After we'd gone past it three miles

before we stopped for directions, we went back and went in the post office for more.

The post office was also a gas station, a grocery, and a package liquor store. The grizzled old man behind the counter said:

"Arnold spreads all over the country, like. We got three rural deliveries." He pushed his gold-rimmed spectacles an inch farther down his nose. "Lookin' for somebody?"

I said: "Where's Rider's place? E. F. Rider."

"Oh—him." The old fellow made a noise in his throat like he was going to spit, but didn't. "He's a pretty rich feller. Got lots of places. Pretty tight feller, too. Won't give his son no money. You his son?"

Bones leaned on the counter and heehawed like a jackass.

We finally got the directions from the old fellow. E. F. Rider, it seemed, owned a large farm on the Magothy River, and used his house there for a summer home. But the farm was only a bobby. He had a pretty large real estate business; and in order to make the farm pay its taxes, he had built several shore bungalows which he rented in the summer. But it was fall now. Only a few of the bungalows were still occupied, and the old fellow wasn't sure exactly which ones.

We didn't inquire about Virginia James or her mother. We took the sand road the old fellow pointed out, stopped at a whitewashed frame house about a mile in from the boulevard.

An old colored woman there gave us directions. "Yas, sah. Dey's in dat ders bungalow what sits out on de point." She lifted a pickaninny by the back of his diapers and carried him squealing to the door. She pointed. "Down dat road, an' turn left. Cain't miss it. Two awful pretty young white womens." She grinned at us toothlessly.

I said: "Two?" That meant Mrs. James was probably with Virginia. "Anybody living with them?"

She laughed aloud and clapped her free hand on her thigh. "Lawdy! Ah dean' know! Dar's strange doin's in dat dar house. Strange doin's!"

"What nature of strange doings?"

She rolled her eyes and said nothing.

I peered at her. I know colored people well enough to know they love to gossip but won't tell anything important. And I guessed she'd gotten all the gossip out of her system.

I went back to the car and kicked life into the motor.

Bones climbed in and said: "What the hell do you think she meant?"

I shrugged. "Your guess, Bones, is as good as mine."

**T**HE HOUSE was a fairly new hangar. You went back to it along a winding road, just two wheel ruts with grass growing between them. There was a small clearing at the back of the house. The front faced the river, which wasn't very wide here, and the porch was about fifty yards from the water. Everything was very quiet. There was just enough breeze to make ripples on the river, and the autumn leaves rustled faintly in the trees.

I swung the car in a circle around the clearing. Left it head away from the house. If it was necessary to leave here fast, I didn't want to take time to turn around.

Then I noticed a new yellow Eight parked in among the trees.

Behind me, Bones said: "Look! A guy!"

I swung around. The small hack porch was no more than a stoop, and on it was a tall, thin man watching us curiously. We went toward him. He wore white ducks and white buckskin shoes and a very dark blue pullover sweater. He didn't say anything until we were almost up to him. But his eyes followed us all the way—the blackest, meanest-looking pair of eyes that it's ever been my misfortune to see. And what pallor! His skin was as pale as a white perch's belly; and that's pretty damned pale, believe you me. His lips were only a shade darker. They scarcely moved when he spoke; and the booming voice that came out so effortlessly almost drove me back on my heels.

He said: "What the hell do you want?"

I said: "We want to see Mrs. James."

My voice, in comparison, was like a whisper.

He kept staring at us. We were closer now—at the foot of the three porch steps—and I was getting a better look at him. His eyes were what interested me. They were snake-eyes; lidless, lashless.

Then the voice came again: "What do you want to see her about?"

Bones took over then. "Personal business," he snapped, and his green eyes danced. He loved the opportunity of getting nasty.

If it was possible for those lidless eyes to blink, they did. He thought that voice had us huffed.

Bones went up a step and said: "We came all the way down here from Baltimore to see her. And we're going to—if we have to get the sheriff."

Bluff is a great thing in the small loan business. Bluff is a great factor in any collections. But bluff meant not a hang to this snake-eyed guy. He roared: "You get the hell off this porch!"

I must have goggled at him. I know I took a step backward: when he let that voice loose it was like thunder. But Bones went up. He went one step, two, shook his finger in that foghorn's face. He roared back:

"We're here on legitimate business. If Mrs. James is living here, we've got the right to see her. And if you know what's good for you, you'll bring her out!"

The foghorn spat in Bones's face.

I grabbed Bones. He let out a yelp that would have put Tarzan to shame, and I had a hard time holding the skinny devil. Then he began to curse. He'd been to sea—most Baltimore kids have—and he had some of the most magnificent combinations. And by the time I quieted him, Snake-eyes was inside. I heard the lock click on the door.

I let go of Bones and said: "Nice guy."

"Yeah."

"He's slammed the door on us," I added, and grinned.

That happened to be right up our alley. We were pretty damned used to having doors slammed in our faces. Bones rapped: "You take this door. I'll take the front."

I watched him disappear around the side of the house.

I went up on the tiny back porch. I opened the screen door, banged it a few times, beat a fast rat-a-tat-tat on a panel of the wooden door. Bones sounded as though he was kicking the front door. I tried that too, using my heels. Then I heard the sharp, metallic ring of metal against glass. I got out a half-dollar of my own, went to work on the windows.

The racket was terrific. It echoed down the river, reverberated around the cove. Then Bones began yelling: "Oh, Mrs. James! You got company outside!"

A window near me shot up. I saw Snake-eyes's nose pressing against the screen. He bellowed: "Listen, you! There's a sick woman in here!"

Bones bellowed back: "Well, go and tell her she's got company!"

The window slammed down. I kept rapping for a few more seconds, suddenly found my brain at work. Suppose there really was a sick woman in there? I whistled, ran around to Bones and said:

"Hey! Maybe that foghorn's a doctor!"

Bones snarled: "So what?" But he stopped pounding.

I said: "If so, and a woman is sick, they could probably sue the company for about half a million."

Bones looked at me for a moment. Suddenly he yelped: "Let 'em sue! That dirty baboon! I thought you were worrying about the woman."

He went back to his pounding and made the whole window shake.

I put my arms around him, yanked him away.

Snake-eyes appeared at a window about three yards away. Behind him the room was dark, and of course his sweater was dark, and all I could see was a pale face and burning black eyes. And a rifle barrel. It gleamed once, as it caught a ray from the sun; then the muzzle pressed against the screen, bulged that out a little. I froze. Bones—I still had my arms around him—went as rigid as steel. Neither one of us could speak.

## CHAPTER IV

### BRASS HAT ENIGMA



**S**NAKE-EYES clipped: "You'll stop that racket now!"

I felt Bones relax slightly. I relaxed somewhat myself. I thought Snake-eyes was going to shoot without even say-

ing such a small thing as *hee*.

Then Bones made me freeze again. He ripped out, very contemptuously: "Bah! You ain't got the guts!"

I found my voice somehow. I saw the screen bulge more, almost imperceptibly, and I got around to speaking, although my voice sounded queer. It seemed to come from my toes. I said: "Now, just a minute, mister. We're not going to argue with a gun. We're down here to see Mrs. James, not to start a war."

Snake-eyes said: "Well, you're going to start one, if you don't keep him quiet." If ever a man meant what he said, the old fog-horn meant that.

I said hastily: "Now look, guy. We're from the National Finance Corporation, and we're here on legitimate business. We want to see Mrs. James. We haven't told the cops where she is, and we haven't any intention of doing it. But if you get funny with that rifle—" I hesitated; it's pretty difficult to be tough when you're at the wrong end of one of those things. "But if you don't put up the rifle, we're going to find a phone and let the cops come down here and see Mrs. James. Get it?"

I guess he got it all right. He thought a moment, then turned and bellowed: "Viola! What the hell does the National Finance Company want to see you about?"

Viola James was one of the most hauntingly attractive women I've ever seen in my life. After Snake-eyes let me in—he wouldn't even consider Bones's joining me—she came into the front room wrapped in a dark-green bathrobe and with a tan scarf knotted at her neck. She had very black hair. It was bobbed, not too carefully kept, and a few of the

strands were light gray. But these were scarcely noticeable. I judged her to be about twenty-three—it turned out later she was twenty-seven—and she had a very poised, but fragile look. Nothing anaemic about her, though. There was grace and a certain vigor in her slenderness. I think that that's how she packed such a lot of sex appeal into a body that's usually so-so.

She sat on the sofa, her shoulders very erect, and her light green eyes were quite wide and questioning. She said, her voice calmly incredulous: "You want to see me?" There was something about her then that seemed very familiar to me.

Snake-eyes stood beside her, still holding the rifle.

I didn't see any sense in answering the question. I said: "Mrs. James, you and your husband, Francis T. James, got twenty loans from our offices in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore—all under assumed names. Now, don't deny it. Our company had checked on you thoroughly, and we know it was you. What we want is six thousand dollars—we won't charge you any interest—and we want it right now."

She looked at me.

I said: "Is that clear?"

She kept on looking at me, and her eyes grew wider, bewildered. "But I—"

I cut her off quickly. "The police are looking for you, Mrs. James. We haven't

begun prosecution yet, and we won't start it if you pay the six thousand. But the police are looking for you just the same. We haven't told them where you are."

"You mean—"

"I mean we want our six thousand."

Snake-eyes's voice boomed out: "That's blackmail!"

I shrugged. Since Viola James had entered the room, I'd had my eyes on her. Now I turned them to the foghorn for the first time since she'd come in. I said stuhhornly: "We want our six thousand."

**B**UT HE wasn't looking my way. He had one of his long bony hands on Viola James's shoulder, was shaking her—not hard, but tensely. He said hoarsely: "It is blackmail, Viola—theoretically. But, hell! how'd you get in a mess like that?"

She met his gaze gravely. "You know me, Alex. Francis was so honest, so-o—" she seemed to hesitate—"weak. I—I could make him do things he—hated to do."

Alex slapped her face.

She didn't cringe. Her chin came up a little; she put her hand to her cheek. Otherwise she didn't move. Quite simply she said:

"Please don't, Alex."

He was towering over her, his right hand clenched along his lean thigh.

She looked over at me and said: "I'm sorry."

## A HEALTH WARNING!

Printed in the interest of public well-being!

**A** COLD is nothing to trifle with! It may easily lead to more serious troubles. The moment you begin sniffing and sneezing, be on your guard! Doctors have laid down a few simple rules to help you in your fight against colds:

Stay out of crowds. Get plenty of rest. Drink lots of water. Keep your body warm. Keep your feet dry. And keep regular!

Doctors are agreed that a regular "movement" will help to shorten the duration of a cold. Moreover, intestinal regularity will do much to make you less susceptible to colds.

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When Nature forgets—remember

# EX-LAX

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I guess I'm pretty stupid. I yelled: "For what?"

"For causing a scene."

I swallowed.

Alex took a backward step. His eyes were still on her, furiously—burning as they'd burned at Bones and me. All the tendons in his thin neck were taut. He said: "I guess you'd better pay him the six thousand."

She smiled. "I don't know where I'd get it, Alex. Will you get my hank book for me?"

Alex started out of the room. His face was pinched, flushed—it actually showed a faint color—and then he stopped so quickly he looked like he'd been hit. I blinked, looked around.

There was a girl in the doorway—a black-haired girl whose brown eyes looked enormous in her pale face. But her pallor wasn't scrubbed-looking and natural like the foghorn's. Hers was sickly. Her nightgown peeped out from under the brown robe she must have hastily donned, and which hung loosely over her.

Alex stared at her.

Viola James said: "Jimmie, you shouldn't—"

Jimmie said in a cold, impersonal voice: "Why are the police looking for you, Viola?"

Viola James hesitated. "Why, Jimmie—"

"It's not because of the finance company," Jimmie went on coldly. "I heard what the young man said—they won't prosecute if you pay. Why are the police looking for you?"

"I—"

"Why did you say Dad was so weak?"

Alex said tightly, with an effort to sound kind: "Now, now, Jimmie. Now, now, honey. You're sick. You're wrought up. You get back to bed."

Jimmie laughed at him. It was an awful laugh—shrill, with a touch of hysteria in it. She cried: "Sick! Who made me sick?" And spinning on Viola, Jimmie screamed suddenly: "You killed him, that's why! You killed him, you—you—" She ran screaming toward Viola.

I bounced from my chair, tackled Alex

at the knees. We went down in a corner and I yelled: "Bones! Bones!"

A floor lamp crashed on top of us and a chair tipped over.

Bones came rushing in the front door. I didn't see him; I heard him yelp, "Coming, Shag! Coming!" and heard the pound of his lanky feet outside on the porch. Then I heard the front door to the room slam open. I was hanging on to that rifle with all the strength that was in me. The only other thing I could hear was the pounding of Alex's curses in my ears. He knew some fancy ones, too.

Then Bones leaned over us and said: "Ah! Spit in my face, will you?" He began throwing punches at Alex like a Harry Greb.

Alex let go of the rifle. Self-preservation, I suppose, is still the first law of nature; and I wasn't hurting him, I'm sure of that. He turned on Bones with a snarl. But Bones got in a good right, and Alex sat down on my belly.

I said: "Oomph!" I was holding the rifle at a snappy port arms, and I shoved it out hard, clunked the back of Alex's head with the breech.

He wavered. Bones swung a wide right that caught him above the eye, and he toppled over sideways, not out but stunned. I got to my feet. I looked around and was suddenly half stunned myself.

Jimmie was staring at Viola's face with her tiny fists, and Viola sat taut, motionless, her hands clenched in her lap, taking it. Her eyes were closed, her jaws clamped tight.

I said: "Hey!"

Jimmie stopped.

"Your robe," I said. It was half open now, due to her movement.

"Oh."

Jimmie wrapped the robe around her more securely, stared at us defiantly. She had guts, that girl.

I said: "Maybe you'd better get back to bed. Maybe—"

I broke off as I heard the screen door on the porch open. Footsteps pattered across the boards. I looked at Bones, frowned, half raised the rifle. Then the door opened, and Cromwell came in.

He'd hardly put his foot inside before Viola exclaimed: "Charles!"

I looked around quickly. Who in the hell was Charles?

Cromwell said in an extremely quiet voice: "Hello, Viola."

## CHAPTER V

### GUY'S LIKE YOU . . .



**S**OMETHING snapped in my brain. Something that seemed to release a catch on a revolving stage and send a whirlpool of facts spinning giddily in front of me. I stabbed a glance at Cromwell.

He stood spraddle-legged, his hands plunged deeply into his topcoat pockets, his chin in against the base of his throat, his eyes like gray ice, soiled and roughened by the wind. I don't think Bones caught anything menacing in his attitude. He exploded, "Why, Mr. Cromwell! Hew in hell—" and stopped. Jimmie started to say something, too—and stopped. Alex's voice boomed from the floor:

"Se you're the sucker she married!"

I said: "What?"

"Viola is this guy Cromwell's wife. Didn't you know that?"

I didn't know it. But, knowing it, a lot was cleared up for me. There was still plenty, however, that I didn't get, and I raised the rifle, levelled it at Cromwell's chest. I wasn't going to take any more chances. But it was funny; I was respectful to him, even then.

I said: "Don't move, Mr. Cromwell."

He looked at Viola James—or rather Viola Cromwell—queerly.

She shrugged and said: "The young man seems to have more sense than you gave anybody in the company credit for."

I scowled at her. It wasn't much of a scowl because privately I was pretty pleased. But then I remembered the business at hand and switched my gaze to

Bones. I said: "Get those guns out of his pockets."

"Whose pockets?"

"Who am I pointing this harrel at?"

Bones said incredulously: "Have you gone completely ga-ga?"

"Listen," I told him. "For the sake of something, use your noodle. Or try to. Have you looked at the reproduction of the picture that was passed out to you in the office?"

Bones started. He reached in his inside pocket, dragged out the picture, took one long look at it, then looked at Viola Cromwell.

I said: "Does it look like her?"

He shook his head slowly, wonderingly.

I said: "That reproduction's from a picture of a woman almost forty. Take a closer look at Mrs. Ja—I mean, Mrs. Cromwell."

Bones blinked.

"Recognize her?" I asked.

"Well, there's something familiar—"

"Sure there is," I said. "Something damned familiar. She was the last girl Blanchard hired and fired the first time I won ten hucks from you."

Bones ejaculated: "Well now, I'll be damned!"

"You ought to be. Maybe I ought to, too. I should have known it the first time I laid eyes on her." I tightened up on the rifle a little. "And that clears up why none of those screwy loans were gotten in our office. Blanchard would have recognized the woman as Cromwell's wife." I scowled. "You still don't get it? Listen. Francis James, the guy who was murdered, and Viola here, Cromwell's wife, were the man and woman who got all of those loans. Remember what Cromwell said: 'At Mr. Reynolds's suggestion, although I insisted on going in the house and stealing the picture myself—' Remember? Well, Cromwell had to steal a picture because Reynolds wanted one, and he had to go in the house himself to save his hide. Because if Reynolds had gone in and gotten a picture of Viola, who was posing as James's wife, Blanchard would have recognized her and spilled the beans that she was really Cromwell's wife. Get that?"

"And wait, Cromwell went in, all right—and probably planned to say he couldn't find a picture. But he got a lucky break—or so he thought. He found a picture with the inscription, 'To Jimmie, the best James ever. From Mother.' Swell! That was the picture of the first Mrs. James, and she was dead and Cromwell knew it. Let us try to find her until hell freezes over."

**T**HE BEGINNING of what looked like understanding seeped into Bones's eyes. Encouraged, I went on:

"And another thing. How did that outside man in Philly get that address? Where would you look, Bones, if every family you went to see didn't know anybody had used their name, and you didn't even know the right name of the couple who had used theirs? Because don't forget that when Francis James and Viola got those loans, they didn't use the name they were known under in Towson: Mr. and Mrs. James. They assumed names of actual couples who were away on vacation trips. And the only addresses that the company knew were those of the couples whose names had been assumed. So where would you look?"

"Well, here's what happened: Cromwell planted information with one of the couples whose names had been forged that a Mr. and Mrs. James, who lived in Towson, had used their home in their absence—because the brass hats were pressing Cromwell and he had to do something. So, then, to cover himself, Cromwell told James and Viola what he'd done, and told them to disappear so the company wouldn't find them. Which meant that at least Cromwell had found out who got the bad loans—and found where they lived. Which was probably enough to let him hold his job. Is that clear?"

Viola Cromwell said, "It's terribly clear, and cleverly thought out—but I'm sorry it isn't quite true."

I snapped a glance at her—I wasn't forgetting Cromwell's hands in those pockets—and she was smiling at me gently. I said: "No? Aren't you really Cromwell's wife?"

"Oh, yes."

"And didn't you and Francis James get all those loans from us?"

"Certainly."

"But the rest of it isn't true?"

"Unfortunately, no. Part of it is, though." She seemed brighter, more vivacious than I'd seen her. "The part about Charles telling us to disappear—that's perfectly true. However, I think the trouble is that you're giving Charles credit for entirely too much intelligence. He didn't plant—as you call it—the information. He's rather a careful, efficient man; he wouldn't take such a chance. Not Charles. Taking chances calls for a lot of courage."

Cromwell looked about to choke. He blazed: "Viola!"

She laughed and said: "Now, Charles, you know I love to tease you. Anyway—" addressing me again—"he didn't plant the information. One of the apartments—we had to go to the homes of the people whose names we assumed long enough to let your outside man list the furniture: the company must have its security, you know—one of the apartments was so lovely we spent a few hours there. Francis took off his coat so he could relax while reading the paper. And we were interrupted—it was the son who came in, I think. We had to leave by the fire escape, and poor Francis—" she began to laugh silently, as if she were almost afraid to laugh—"was so much in a hurry he left his suit coat behind." She knuckled her eyes and kept laughing silently.

I said: "You mean the name and address was in his clothes?"

"In his wallet—which he kept in his coat."

"Did you and your husband—Cromwell—plan to get all these loans from the company?"

She nodded. "He planned it. He told me to hire a man to work with me, and I chose Francis. He was the contractor who built our house."

This was getting involved. I took my gaze from Cromwell long enough to look at Bones, saw his eyes looking like flower buds about to pop in spring. Jimmie was staring, too. She sat on the edge of the sofa, her robe hugged tightly around

her, not far from Viola. There were deep lines in Cromwell's face, and he hadn't moved. Alex looked harked, nervous.

Viola Cromwell said to me: "It's your turn."

"For what?"

"I love to hear you rationalize. You make Charles out as such an ass."

**T**HAT GUY'S PERSONALITY HAD me whipped, I suppose; I know I felt myself flushing. But I had a stronger feeling not to let Viola Cromwell down. I said:

"First, answer me a couple questions. Who is Alex?"

She smiled. "Dr. Alexander Rider. He—or rather his father—owns this house."

"Is that his car outside?"

She nodded.

"But he isn't a real doctor, is he? I mean, isn't he an interne?"

She said: "Please tell me how you knew that."

"I guessed it. Guys don't run around in white ducks and white shoes in the fall—and if he was a full-fledged doctor, he'd have taken the white stuff off. Internes are proud of being internes, and doctors don't want to be mistaken for one."

She looked at Cromwell triumphantly. "See, Charles? And to think he works under you." Then to me: "Please go on."

I was trying to control my flush. "Well, internes are pretty poorly paid, and Alex's father wouldn't give him much money. Now, you don't need to ask me how I knew that, Mrs. Cromwell; the old postmaster said Alex's old man didn't give him any money. So Alex, being poor, and there being a woman in love with him who could lay her hands on money, and give him plenty—"

Alex leaped to his feet. "What the hell are you saying?"

I said: "I'm saying that from the way I figure it, seeing Jimmie here like this—that her father figured Viola's influence on Jimmie was not the most desirable thing he'd want for his daughter. And maybe he got sick of the whole business—didn't want Jimmie to be the daughter of a thief. And I'm saying her father got sore, told Mrs. Cromwell to go to

hell—and told Cromwell the same thing, refused to disappear. James was going to the cops and confess the whole damned business."

Viola Cromwell's eyes were wide, bright. "And how did you know that?"

I said: "Two and two make four. Alex is poorly paid, but has a new car, yet his dad doesn't give him any dough. The dough must be coming from you. A little while ago Jimmie cried out that she was sick, but who makes her sick? You no doubt made Alex make her sick, drugs or something, and prevailed upon her to come here for a rest. And Alex is seeing to it that she remains. And now with our coming here, and her hearing everything, she suddenly realized that Alex wasn't trying to make her well—"

Viola Cromwell interrupted me. She said: "Alex is keeping her sick so he can experiment, I suppose. That's really amazing!"

"So is the rest of it," I told her.

"What do you mean?"

"That you killed Francis James," I said. "That you slipped up town, shot him, and then tried to make it look like the gun went off accidentally while he was cleaning it. Not because he was going to the cops and confess, either; that didn't mean a damned thing to you. Because you knew as well as I know now—and as well as Cromwell has known all along—that the National Finance Company wouldn't prosecute, wouldn't want the publicity. There was nothing much you had to worry about. And you had to get Jimmie away, because if the police questioned her she might say something that could incriminate you. What you were planning to do with her ultimately, I don't know. But I do know you killed her father."

She was suddenly quite grave—and silent. The others, too, were speechless. My voice sounded loud in my own ears and as I went on the story became even clearer to me.

I went on: "You killed Francis James because he was through with you, because you couldn't control him any more. I know your type. You love to lure men on with your frankness, to get them in love

with you, then to make them squirm. You pick the kind of men who don't know much about women; they're easy game with flattery. But guys like Alex you fall in love with. Guys who beat you and slam you around. Guys who know just what you are. Guys—"

"Guys like you," she said softly.

I laughed. "Guys like me, hell," I told her. "As long as I'm holding this rifle, it's guys like me. But let me put it down . . . Listen. You like to do things ordinary people wouldn't do. You like to be clever. Things can happen to you like they do to ordinary people—but you've taught yourself to take them calmly. You imagine you're above the emotions of ordinary people. Witness the way you let Jimmie beat on you; you sat there and took it like it was all beneath you. But you've got a weakness. Let somebody do something to you that makes you doubt your own power; let somebody do something that makes you doubt your own superiority; let somebody convince you that you're just common like the rest of us . . . When you couldn't control a guy as weak as James, it sort of got you, didn't it?"

## CHAPTER VI

### FINALE—IN BLOOD



**S**HE FLEW at me. She came with her hands clawed, her eyes dilated horribly, her mouth twisted and purplish. I ward-ed her off with the rifle. Bones yelled, "Watch out, Shag!" and suddenly I real-

ized she'd stepped back, was digging into her bathrobe pocket. Her hand came out holding a small, nicked automatic; she shoved it out awkwardly, fired.

It was practically impossible to miss at that distance. I saw the belch of flame, felt the shock, but peculiarly only in my hands and wrists. The rifle went out of my hands. The barrel struck me under my left jawbone, and the butt fell on my

foot. I started forward and tripped. I fell headlong, the rifle tied up in my legs. I guess the gods were with me. There'd have been no rifle breech to stop the second slug. It went through the space where I'd been standing, crashed the wall behind me.

Out of her sight for an instant, I found myself fairly safe there on the floor. She turned toward bigger game; turned with the same savagery that had marked her onslaught on me, only somehow more vindictive. I caught onto it quickly. Her back was to Cromwell—she held him in contempt—and the little, nicked automatic began spitting flame at Alex.

He cowered. The lidless eyes shrank momentarily, then seemed to burst blackly with horror. I saw a hole in his cheek. I saw another, this one slightly lower. She pumped the other two slugs into his chest, actually knocked him over backwards.

Then she turned, still hot and blazing, and faced Cromwell's guns.

He had them out, all right. Both of them. Big, black thirty-eights, brand new and brightly polished.

I held my breath. He stood there, his fine gray eyes dulled with torture, the firm muscles in his face bunched in ugly rope-twists. She met his gaze defiantly. Her hair was awry, her chin up, her bathrobe half off her shoulder. She made a lovely picture. Too lovely for Cromwell, I suppose. I saw his face soften. It was like an iron hush dissolving over a white flame. She walked into the mouth of his guns, took them both away from him.

I gasped.

I'd forgotten the rifle. I clawed at it now; cleared as I noticed the perspiration dampening her face. She said softly, "Guys like you—" and pointed one of the guns at me.

I got the rifle up somehow. I shot her through the middle twice before she had a chance to fire. But I couldn't watch her die. Suddenly I was very sick.

Not Bones, however. He looked at me, said: "Hold it. Clench your teeth. It'll pass in a minute."

Jimmie asked: "Is she dead?"

Bones frowned, said: "I don't know." He walked over, stood away from the body, craned his neck deferentially. "She looks like it."

I said: "F-feel her."

Cromwell said wearily: "What's the use? She's dead."

We'd all forgotten him. He sat on the floor as if he'd slumped there, his head drooping forward, his back supported by the wall, his legs flopped out straight and absolutely limp. A strong man with a wrecked will.

Bones squinted at him and demanded: "How the hell do you know?"

Cromwell smiled faintly, shrugged. "Roberta is a good shot."

My stomach was feeling better. I said: "Better than you, at any rate. Or were you just trying to scare us? Come to think of it, that mail box was almost ten feet to my left."

The Canuck said: "I was just trying to scare you."

"You followed us, didn't you?"

"Certainly I followed you. I told Blanchard I thought it would be better for me to follow you in case you ran into too serious a jam—and that it was better for your morale if you didn't know about it. When you called in on the private line, Blanchard called me in Washington from another. Then he connected the two lines in the office and we talked."

"I'd guessed that."

"You guessed a lot."

I said: "Where does Spaulding fit in?"

**C**ROMWELL shrugged. "He's Viola's brother, that's all. When Reynolds—the Eastern supervisor—put the pressure on me, I had to have Spaulding looked up, although it didn't worry me. He didn't know anything about the loans."

"How about Alex? Did you know him?"

"I've known about him for quite a long time." Cromwell sighed. "You know I met Viola in Blanchard's office, then happened to run into her in a bar one night. We went out together. She was attractive, clever—well, you know, a smart woman can do most anything with a man. I married her. But I didn't find out un-

til much later that she was in love with Alex, had been supporting him with my money. That she married me because she and Alex knew I had money. She went through every cent I had, you know."

"I thought so."

"That's the reason I suggested getting the loans. I needed the money badly. I had notes to meet, bills to pay—you know I couldn't keep my job in this business if my credit went bad."

"I know." I cleared my throat. "But one thing more. How did you know what I was after when I went to the mail box? You hear my conversation with Spaulding?"

He shook his head. "I knew him, I went in and talked to him right after you came out. Knowing you, I knew you had something up your sleeve."

"Oh." I chewed my lip. "But how about the shot? How'd you get away with that?"

"I fired it from an empty washroom, after locking the door."

I said: "Well, well. The plot thickens." I looked at Bones. He was leaning against the wall drinking all the dope in. "Satisfied?" I asked him.

"Nope. Not yet." He moved over in front of me, put his hands on his skinny hips. "Now we've got the murder business cleared up, how about the publicity and the six thousand bucks?"

I said: "Oh." That had slipped my mind.

Jimmie said slowly: "I'll pay the six thousand." She looked from one of us to the other as if to see if we believed her. "I'll pay it. Dad stole it—or rather was a partner in stealing it—and I really think I ought to. I believe he'd want me to." She hesitated. "There's an insurance policy, you know. It goes to me. Five thousand—and it's double indemnity. I'll still get four."

I said: "But Jimmie! After all, it's your dough, and—"

Bones rapped: "Getting soft, Shag?"

I clenched my teeth.

Jimmie said: "I want to pay it. Really I do."

I nodded. It seemed a hell of a thing to me—but if she wanted to, then she want-

ed to. I looked over at Cromwell. Some of the strength was coming back to his body; he was laboring hard to get to his feet. He finally got there, staggered, leaned against the wall. His smile was directed at me, and he said:

"So you're not all hard-boiled, either—eh, Roberts?"

Out of the corner of my eyes I caught a glimpse of Jimmie. She had the robe hugged tightly around her again. I said doggedly: "I don't see why in hell she should pay and clear your skirts."

Cromwell smiled. Somehow he seemed bright, cheerful. "Oh, she won't clear my skirts . . . Now, about the publicity. Hand me the rifle."

"The hell you say."

"Don't be silly. I know what I'm doing."

I handed it to him. He disappeared into the kitchen for a moment, and we heard the sound of water running. He came back polishing the stock with his handkerchief. "Your fingerprints are off now."

I watched him. He went outside, fired the rifle in the air—it was a Winchester repeater—and came back smiling. "In case they make a paraffin test."

I said: "It'll still look screwy. You catch your wife with another man—she shoots him, and you shoot her. Then shoot yourself. It doesn't add up."

He shrugged. "It'll have to do."

I said: "Oh, no it won't—at all."

Cromwell blinked at me. I stepped in, fainted low with my left, cracked my right on the side of his chin. He slumped up against the wall, sank like a rag doll.

Bones yelled: "What the hell!"

I growled, "Use your head, nincompoop—for something besides to put grease on. We inquired at the post office, didn't we? We got directions from the old colored woman, didn't we? How had do you think the publicity would be if we sneaked off and the cops got us, anyway?"

Bones scratched his head.

I didn't say anything more. I stood looking down at Cromwell, feeling sorry for the guy, feeling glad too that he'd finally begun to snap out of it. He'd be all right now that his nemesis was gone. He'd lose his job, sure—but the company wouldn't prosecute. He'd be all right—if no more women turned up.

If no more women turned up . . . I shrugged. Then I noticed Jimmie James, the robe still tight around her, watching me with a peculiar look in her eyes. She murmured: "Guys like you—"

I turned away quickly. I'd just seen what a woman might do to a fellow. But it was funny; right away, I began pulling for her. I said to myself: "Jimmie's all right. Sure she is." But I wished like hell we had a doctor handy—so he could get right to work on her.



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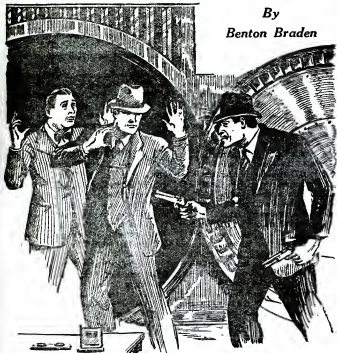
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# PROBAK JUNIOR

# Forty Grand Fadeout

By  
Benton Braden



**Q** *Snatch artists were so clever they had a bank sewed up to safely pass ransom thousands. And G-man Jim Forde stuck his neck out so far that he was left to rot in a treasure trap.* **A**

**J**IM FORDE moved slowly, apparently aimlessly, down the short main street of the village of Clayville. At each step his feet seemed to move more sluggishly. His relaxed figure indicated complete lack of purpose. Yet not for an instant did his eyes waver from the front doors of the First National Bank of Clayville.

The bank was across the street, on the corner, and in exactly three minutes it would close. Jim Forde was timing his steps so that he could cross the street and enter the door just a few seconds before it was scheduled to close.

Forde, although almost a stranger in the village, knew a great deal about that bank and the young man, named



Bert Orton, who managed it. It was a one-man bank. It never carried more than five thousand in cash. Five thousand was ample to care for the ordinary needs of the few business houses in the village. The bank shipped its excess cash to banks in nearby cities where it could be drawn upon when needed.

Forde's eyes glittered a little as Sam Weisner, who owned and operated two of the local stores, emerged from the doors of the bank. An empty bag swung from Weisner's wrist. He had just made his last deposit for the day. He hurried on up the opposite side of the street.

Forde reached the corner. He glanced at his watch and moved his left arm a bit to assure himself that his gun and holster hadn't slipped out of place. Then he crossed the street, still walking deliberately. It was fifteen seconds to three o'clock when he pushed open the door of the bank and stepped inside.

As he closed the door he unobtrusively threw the inside bolt so that no one could enter behind him. A quick glance told him that Bert Orton was alone in the single cage that the bank boasted. Orton appeared not to notice that the bolt had been thrown, but he thrust his head through the opening in the grille and looked sharply at Forde.

The questioning look in his eyes was natural. Bert Orton had never seen Jim Forde before. But there was no threat in Forde's pleasant features. He was smiling.

"What is it?" Orton asked quickly. "The bank is closing—right now."

"I guessed as much," Forde's smile widened as he spoke. "I took the liberty of throwing the bolt as I entered. I wanted to make sure we wouldn't be interrupted."

Orton looked startled, took a step backward.

"You needn't be alarmed," Forde held up the palms of his hands reassuringly. "It's not a stickup. I only want to ask you a few questions. I closed the door so that a late customer couldn't interrupt us. My name is Forde—Jim Forde. Here's my calling card."

He took a small leather case from his

pocket as he advanced to the window, opened it, held it up for Orton's inspection. Orton took a very deep breath as he looked at it, then expelled slowly.

"You—you," Orton stammered and he lost a little color in his face, "you're what the papers call a—a—"

"A G-man?" Forde chuckled. "Right. I'm from the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

"What—what business could you have here?" Orton asked weakly.

"I'll explain that," Forde replied, his tone a little brisk now. "But suppose I step into the space back there behind the counter where we can sit down and talk things over."

**W**ITHOUT WAITING for Orton's consent he moved past the cage toward the rear and swung open the gate in the railing. His eyes were very alert now. There were two other exits from this space. One led into the cage and the other was a door that obviously led into a room in the rear of the bank. There was also, of course, the door that led into the vault. The vault door was still open.

Forde had already taken a chair when Orton came slowly from the cage, swinging the gridded door shut behind him. Orton hesitated a moment, then sat down in the chair that faced Forde.

"The First National Bank of Clayville has been doing a very nice business lately, hasn't it, Orton?" Forde began abruptly.

Orton's tongue flicked out and dampened his dry lips. "Well, yes," he admitted. "We're not complaining any. But that isn't remarkable. We always do a pretty good business at this season of the year."

"Do your deposits always take a jump at this season of the year, too?" Forde demanded.

Orton's right hand instinctively went to his collar band, loosened it. "Just—just what are you driving at?"

"I'm asking you about your deposits, Orton," Forde said tersely. "I think you know exactly what I'm driving at, but I'll be plainer. You have, within the last

TDA

week, increased your deposits substantially, haven't you?"

"Only—only a trifle," Orton faltered. "Our deposits have gone up a little, but—"

"I'm not referring to the total amount of your deposits, Orton!" Forde interrupted, and his voice was harsh now. "I'm referring to special deposits made by special parties—in very unusual sums for a village of this size."

Orton moved his head and neck uncomfortably. His lips parted, then closed again without speaking.

"I am reliably informed," Forde went on, "that normally you carry around five thousand in cash in this bank to take care of the village business. When your cash gets beyond that amount you ship it to larger banks nearby where you can draw on it when you need it. Is that right?"

Orton blinked, then nodded confirmation.

"During the early part of this week," Forde went on relentlessly, "you forwarded forty thousand dollars in currency. You shipped twenty thousand to one bank, twenty thousand to another."

"The money was deposited by customers of the bank," Orton offered nervously. "The books will show that."

"I don't doubt it," Forde said dryly. "I don't doubt that your records are above reproach. I don't doubt that the deposits were actually made in the same denominations, in the same currency, that you shipped on to the other banks. It was all in five, tens, and twenties. In the whole forty thousand there was not a single one-dollar bill, nor a fifty. Isn't that a bit remarkable?"

"I don't think so," Orton's face was red now. He seemed to have lost some of his nervousness, and his eyes showed determination to keep control of himself. "I hardly ever see a bill as large as a fifty in this bank. And the smaller bills are generally kept by the merchants to make change."

Forde leaned forward a little. "But your merchants never saw any of that currency that you shipped out this week, did they?" he asked softly. "That money

wasn't deposited by any of your regular customers, was it?"

"No. No, it wasn't," Orton's eyes showed a little defiance now. "But what difference does that make? A bank is more or less of a public institution. We try to extend our accommodations to all who ask for it."

"Of course, of course," Forde conceded. "And just who were the parties you accommodated in this case? Who was it that walked into this bank and planked down forty thousand dollars in currency? No citizen of Clayville, I'll gamble."

"No, the parties didn't live in Clayville."

"You mean that there was more than one person that deposited that money, Orton?"

**B**ERT ORTON delayed his answer a fraction of a second. During that fraction of a second his eyes went in a fleeting glance to that door that led into the room at the rear of the bank. Then his eyes were meeting Forde's again.

"There was more than one person," he said flatly. "There were four persons. Each one deposited ten thousand dollars. The books show that."

"I won't dispute your books—for the time being," Forde told him with a touch of sarcasm. "At the same time, I'll admit I'm surprised to hear it. I was quite sure that I would find the money was all deposited by one person."

"What—what would make you think that?"

"The fact that the forty thousand dollars came from a common fund, Orton—a fund that was presumably under the control of one man."

"You mean," Orton's voice was hollow, "that you think there was something wrong with that money?"

"Wrong?" Forde snorted. "There was plenty wrong with it. It was mob money. It came from one of the dirtiest crimes ever committed in this country—the Wainwright snatch. But," his tone dropped until it was softly insinuating, "I wonder if it's any news to you. I wonder if you didn't have a pretty good idea

where that jack came from when it was passed over the counter to you."

"I didn't know anything about it," Orton denied steadily. "Perhaps it did occur to me that it was a bit unusual that four strangers should choose this bank for such deposits. But it was all in the ordinary course of business. I wouldn't refuse to accept deposits unless I had a substantial basis to believe something was wrong."

"I guessed that would be your story, Orton. We'll see. Maybe you can give me a good description of the four persons who made the deposits. I'm waiting."

Orton gulped and cleared his throat. Again his eyes went to the door of that rear room in a darting, apprehensive glance. "They were men—all four of them. They came in together, said something about having just concluded a cash sale. Said they wanted to deposit here and check it out as they needed it. I've got the deposit slips and their signatures on file in the—"

"But the descriptions, Orton," Forde interrupted firmly. "Can you give me the descriptions of those four men?"

"It ain't necessary, you lousy Fed!" a voice crackled from Forde's left rear. "I'm all four of 'em. Take a good look at me and you got your descriptions."

Jim Forde slowly turned his head, saw first the threatening muzzles of the two leveled guns, then the taut, snarling face of the man who held the guns. The man was of medium height, thin-shouldered, black-haired and black-eyed. The lines of his face were sharp and cruel. Obviously he had made his entrance from the room at the rear.

"It's your tough luck!" he snapped at Orton, whose face had gone white. "We were playin' you for a sucker both ways, though, so it can't make much diff to you. . . . So the Wainright money was tabbed, was it? Well, that was our play—to find out. How," he demanded of Forde, "was it spotted?"

"Serial numbers," Forde said calmly.

"The dirty rat!" the gunman exploded. "Old man Wainright crossed us. He swore by all that was holy that the

money wasn't tabbed in any way. He was so frantic about the kid that we thought he was on the level about it. Still, we wasn't takin' all the chances. We talked Orton here into shovin' a bit of the jack for us to see if it was all right. So we're out forty grand of it and the rest is so hot we won't know what to do with it. It's a laugh. I'll bet you G-guys threw a duck fit when you found out forty grand of the Wainright dough had showed up?"

"It created something of a sensation," Forde admitted with a smile. "We were expecting some of it to be passed—but not in such large quantities."

"That was Red's bright idea!" the mobster snarled. "Red figured the jack was okay, so he decided we might as well shoot the works on a big scale and find out. He'll blow up when he gets the news. Now, stand up—both of you. Hands high!"

**F**ORDE remained motionless as the gunman cautiously tapped him and removed his weapon from its shoulder holster. The gunman stepped back.

"Into the vault—both of you!" He followed them, both guns again in his hands. "Get on back in!" he ordered as they hesitated, just inside the vault door.

He laughed loudly as they hacked on into the far end of the vault. "It ain't so bad from our angle as you might guess it is, Orton," he boasted. "I'm goin' to take that five grand or so in currency that you keep in the cage. It ain't no sudden thought, either. I been all set to play it that way if anything went wrong. It'll kinda balance things up for the forty grand we tossed off. All right, Mister G-man. See if you're smart enough to get out of here."

He swung the vault door shut, pulled down the lever, and spun the dial. He showed his teeth in a grin as he holstered his guns.

He reached in his inside pocket and removed a round piece of paper that was red on one side. He licked the opposite side with his tongue, crossed to the window, and pressed the paper against

the window glass, held it there for a moment until it stuck securely.

He turned and ran to the cage, slipped the grilled door back, went inside and stuffed the currency that he removed from the drawers into his pockets. He left the cage and went to a position near the door of the rear room. From there he could observe the street without being seen. He waited hardly more than two minutes. He grinned again as the black coupé came into view.

He ran into the rear room and unlatched the side door that opened on the street. He opened it, closed it behind him, stepped nimbly across the sidewalk and around the waiting coupé. He climbed in beside the white-faced girl who sat beneath the wheel.

"Step on it, kid!" he commanded.

"What happened?" she gasped.

"Plenty, Winnie. It's the old blow-off. A G-guy showed up and started askin' the boy scout some pointed questions. I stepped in, accordin' to the plan we already had worked out. I locked 'em both in the vault, grabbed the dough, and beat it. I think I got better than four grand. Not so bad, huh? About the softest bank job that was ever pulled."

"Maybe and maybe not," she commented coolly as the car left the village and shot at high speed into the open road. "The G-boys may be planted all over the landscape."

"I don't think so," he told her. "That G just happened to be the first one on the job. He hustled over to Clayville to see what kind of a smart job was bein' pulled. He'd never dream that one of the mob was actually on the job, in the bank."

"I hope you've got it straight, Flint. Personally I'll feel a lot better when we pull into Red's hideout. . . ."

It was pitch dark and very stuffy inside the small bank vault. The two men stood in silence for a minute or two.

"You might as well give me some of the details, Orton," Forde said. "How did the mob happen to pick on you to handle the Wainright money for them?"

"It was through a girl named Winnie Lang," Orton replied quickly. "I knew her pretty well about three years ago. She was a hostess in a dime-dance place in Capital City where I worked then. About ten days ago she came into the bank. She was dressed like a million dollars and talked about easy money. I was curious and played up to her. She evidently got the impression that I'd play the game. Of course, I didn't dream that she was tied up with a mob. I thought she was hinting at some kind of a confidence game."

"Four days later she came back with that gunman. His name is Flint Bovan."

"I knew him—from his picture," Forde admitted.

"**B**OVAN evidently thought everything was fixed," Orton continued. "He didn't tell me where the money came from. He just told me how it was to be handled and told me what would happen to me if I crossed them. He laid the forty thousand down on my desk and told me to get busy. From that moment on he hardly let me out of his sight. He made me introduce him as my cousin to my housekeeper and other persons who might be suspicious. Every day he sat in that rear room. I wasn't permitted to phone unless he was listening. When he wasn't with me, Winnie Lang kept an eye on me. I don't mind admitting that I was badly worried."

"I can imagine," Forde chuckled. "It's lucky for you that Sam Weisner was as smart as you thought he was. He might have blurted something out, exposed you, the first time you started scratching the dope on his deposit slips. I have no doubt that Flint Bovan would have shot you down if he had suspected that you were crossing him."

"He didn't suspect a thing," Orton said with satisfaction. "Sam is always in the bank four or five times a day anyway. I tried to get all the important dope written on those slips. I didn't want some constable or deputy sheriff to rush in here, not knowing that Flint was waiting with his guns in the back room."

Muffled movements sounded on the

other side of the vault door. "That will be Weisner now," Forde said. "With Stillson, the president of your string of banks, with the combination to the vault door. In a minute we should be—"

They hinked as the vault door swung open. Then they stepped uncertainly out into the light. "You boys all right?" Sam Weisner asked anxiously.

"We're all right," Forde assured him. "No excitement outside, I hope."

"None at all," Weisner stated. "I watched the bank, and it all happened just about as you said it would. That girl drove the black coupé up to the rear door, and the black-haired man jumped in. They went away fast. It's over my head. I don't understand why you didn't have the place surrounded and grab them."

"Because Flint Bovan and Winnie Lang are only two members of the mob," Forde explained with a smile. "There are four others, including Red Cordage, the brains of the mob and as desperate a criminal as there is in the country. We want Red. We want them all. Now there's no need to let the rest of the townsfolk in on what has happened here this afternoon. They'll get the whole story later if our plans work out according to schedule."

"I suggest, Mr. Stillson, that you have another man here in the morning to take charge of the bank temporarily. Then if a member of the Red Cordage mob should take the trouble to see what has happened, he will conclude that Orton has been quietly arrested and removed for questioning. And Red Cordage, knowing that Orton can't give any information that will be of the slightest help to the cops, will figure that his mob is in the clear."

**B**IG RED CORDAGE gulped down his whiskey and deposited the empty glass on the table. "Boy, this is the life!" he exclaimed boisterously. "We got all the comforts of home here, and we'll take it easy till I can figure out another job. I used my head when I picked this joint for a hideout."

His eyes wandered complacently over the large and comfortably furnished living room of the mountain cabin. The other members of his mob were scattered about the room, drinking and smoking. A radio blared dance music.

"You sure did use your head, Red," Flint Bovan agreed noisily. "You was smart in havin' us come in separately and rent three cabins on the same hillside. That way, nobody would suspect nothin' and they'd think it was perfectly natural for us to get acquainted and start partyin' together. And there's no trail for the Feds to follow."

"I'll bet them Feds are madder as hell," Red chortled. "When they found that Wainright jack floatin' in the banks, they thought they had us. It never occurred to that dumb G that we'd have a man right in the hank checkin' up. I'll bet he choked when you walked in and shoved the gats in his face, Flint."

"Yeah, he did," Flint smirked. "He looked like he was goin' to drop right through the floor. But Wainright is the guy that gives me a headache. We ought to go back and hump him for handin' us that tabbed jack. If he'd kept his word and given us straight dough we'd be sittin' pretty now instead of havin' a measly four grand—and it goin' fast."

"Cripes, Flint!" Red growled. "Don't bellyache about that four grand. It was a life saver. If it hadn't been for that we'd be havin' to take a chance and pass some of the rest of the Wainright dough. That would keep us hoppin' around and would be plenty risky. Now we got that four grand of good bank dough to live on till I can figure out a quick play."

Flint glanced at his watch and rose to his feet. "Come on, Winnie," he yawned. "It's two A.M. and we might as well go back to our shack and hit the hay."

The party broke up. Winnie strolled to the door of the living room, which opened on the front porch, and pulled it open. She stood there, staring out at the blackness of the mountainside, waiting for Flint to join her.

Flint reached the door, turned and

said: "So long, gang." He took a step out on to the porch and started to close the door behind him.

The sound that blasted the stillness of the night came from directly in front of him, and to Flint and the men in the room behind him, it was unmistakably the sound of a pistol shot. Flint caught Winnie by the arm, jerked her back into the living room and kicked the door shut. The other men had leaped to their feet.

"What the hell?" Flint rasped.

"Take it easy!" Red Cordage snapped. "Just stay where you are for a minute and see what happens. Ten to one it was just a hill-billy on his way home, lit up and celebratin'."

They waited in silence for perhaps two minutes. Then Red grinned and relaxed.

"That was it," he said confidently. "One of these yokels, lit up on corn, cut loose with his rod to show his good spirits. All right, Flint. Try it again. You and Winnie walk right out the front door and go on to your cabin."

Flint warily opened the door and thrust his head out. He blinked at the darkness. There was no sound or movement out there. He threw the door open.

"Come on, Winnie. Red was right. It was a false—"

He leaped backward as orange jets of flame spurted from the blackness in front of him. The roar of a sub-machine gun echoed deafeningly up the mountainside. Two short bursts that splintered the lattice work beneath the porch. Then silence again.

"Douse the lights!" Big Red yelled as Flint leaped back inside. "Get the guns! Make for the back door! We got to fight our way out!"

The mobsters grabbed their guns and piled through the short hall that led to the kitchen and the rear porch. But they had hardly reached the kitchen when a second sub-machine gun chattered from the woods beyond the clearing at the rear of the house.

The cabin was suddenly illuminated

by wavering white lights that seeped in at the windows and cast ghastly shadows in the rooms. The mobsters rushed back into the living room and shrank against the inner wall.

Flares! Blazing white light burning from the ground on each side of the cabin made the clearing an oasis of brilliance in the blackness.

THERE WAS absolute silence again in the timber beyond the clearing.

"You can all have one guess!" Red Cordage snarled. "We're in a spot. If we walk out of any door or try to make it from a window, they'll knock us off before we get started. I think I get the idea. They're gonna hold us here like this till daylight, then make us give up or gun us. So what are we gonna do?"

"We can make a run for it—go out shootin'," Flint suggested.

"Yeah, we can do that," Red agreed. "We all boasted that we'd never be taken alive. But when a guy says that he'll never be taken alive he means that he'll shoot it out with the cops if he's got so much as a long chance. Here—we ain't got a chance. All of you that want to commit suicide, march right on out and try to run those flares. Personally, I'm goin' to wait for daylight and see what happens."

Big Red guessed right. No more flares came from the timber when it was light enough to see.

Jim Forde bellowed his ultimatum through a megaphone. He gave the mob ten minutes to think it over. They walked out in two minutes, Big Red leading the procession with his hands high above his head. The G-men closed in, searched them and cuffed them together.

"Who tipped you that we was holed up here?" Red asked.

"You tipped us yourselves," Forde chuckled.

"How?"

"The way you handled the money. You see, Red, Bert Orton wasn't quite the sucker that you thought he was. He tipped off the situation in the bank by writing notes on the deposit slips of the bank's best customer, Sam Weisner. Sam

called us. When I walked into the bank just before closing time I knew the set-up, knew from the description that Orton gave and the fact that forty grand was being floated, that it was Flint Bovan who was parked in the back office, that it was your mob behind the play. I could easily have grabbed Flint and Winnie right there, but I wanted the whole mob—you in particular."

"I don't get it," Red growled. "You didn't manage to tail Flint and Winnie to this hideout?"

"No, I didn't. But I guessed just what would happen if I walked in the bank and started asking Orton questions. I guessed that Flint, if he was sure that I was alone, would grab the cash in the till and beat it. That's what he did."

Red stared, a large question in his eyes.

"So just before closing time I had Sam Weisner go into the bank and pretend to make a deposit. Instead of making a deposit, he made a trade with Orton. Orton slipped him the currency that was in the drawer. Weisner slipped Orton a little over four thousand in currency—currency that was marked in a manner that any banker could detect at a glance. Before that trade was made,

the necessary information was on the way to every bank in this section of the country. When some of that money showed up at the bank at Green Falls, just eight miles from here, we got busy in short order. You spent that bank dough freely, never suspecting that it could be traced. You bought groceries, a radio, tires—"

"I get it," Red grimaced. "It was a cinch for you to ask the yokels questions and spot us here. It's our tough luck. We were hooked all around on tabbed jack. I'd like to get my hands on that two-timur' Wainright. He crossed us after we handed him back his kid just like we promised we'd—"

"That's another little mistake you made, Red," Forde grinned. "Wainright didn't cross you. You could have passed that money anywhere in the country without the slightest risk. The money was not marked. The numbers weren't taken. But it was a cinch to figure out that it was the Wainright money that you were putting through. Even without Orton's description of Flint, we would have known it. We've pretty well cleaned up the snatch mobs. The Wainright job was the only unsolved case that involved as much as forty grand."



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# River Rat's Comeback

*By S. J. Bailey*

Author of "Mystery of the Melting Towers," etc.



“Fins” Scanlon was learning fast—to do the things a kid shouldn’t do. And the only man who could help him was a cop in whom he had lost faith.

**M**Y OLD MAN was a smart Irishman. When he got to the south end of his bent, he used to sneak out on the Quincy Street pier to see if he could catch me. He had an old razor belt that was full of nicks, and when I

got home he’d whale me if he caught me dunking.

He said the water wasn’t fit to drown a dead herring in, but I didn’t think it was dirty because I didn’t see any dirt on me when I came out to lie in the sun



under the tail of the big yacht that belonged to Blair, the oil guy.

The whaling the old man would give me wasn't so awfully bad. It used to sting like cig butts, but that was before I got tough to it. Anyway, I thought it was a kind of game with the old man, and I got a kick out of it. He used to lock the bedroom door so the old lady couldn't nose in and then he chased me all over, with me yelling bloody killing and the old lady pounding on the door. I know the old man didn't really mean it. It was a kind of a game. Like some guys play tag and stuff. So the old man played tag with me—only it wasn't any sissy kind of tag.

Yeah, don't get any wrong idea about the old man. He was a pretty swell guy besides being a big-shot cop.

So on this day I'm talking about, me and Nicky Farlane were whooping the wet under the tail of the *Seaspray*—that's the fancy moniker old Blair tied onto his boat—and I was harning mad about some crazy jingles Nicky kept saying. *Cops are flops, your pop's a cop! Cops are flops, your pop's a cop! Over and over, just like that.*

So pretty soon I began to give him a shin-clipping, which is what we call a fast, underwater going over. I was doing plenty to him, me being a fish by nature and him being a land-log in the drink. Every time I came up for air, I flashed the pier a quick once-over, keeping peeled for the old man. That was how I first noticed those two mugs leaning against the watchman's shanty, siking up something on the deck of the *Seaspray*.

Like I said, we were churning the drink right under the boat's tail and couldn't see anything. I figured maybe they were a couple of loafers killing time. But then why should they be acting so sneaky?

Next time down, I darn near tied Nicky's shins into a bow tie. He began to scratch and howl. Just then I took a quick gander and saw brass buttons coming around the shanty. It was the old man, looking for an excuse to play tag with his old razor belt. I sucked in quick and did a fast tail squat. Just before I went under, I saw those two mugs ducking

around the shanty away from brass buttons. Just like me, only quicker. I wondered what they were up to that they had to duck the old man.

I came up under the pier where I got a bunk. Besides my pants I parked some odds and ends of junk that I'd picked up. A busted knife, rusty pins, and a hunk of shell with a funny color that dazzled when the sun hit it.

Nicky Farlane tailed me under. He don't want his old man, Ben Farlane, the ward boss, to find out, either. We held onto the oily, slippery piles, side by side for a couple minutes and then I heard my old man's number tens thump away.

"The sneaking flattie," ripped out Nicky. "I'm gonna get something on him and tell my father. He'll bust him."

"Aw g'wan," I told him. "My old man's a cop. He don't have to take nothing off your old man. My old man says he's got all the floaters—"

"Aw, whadda you know about politics?"

"That's what you think. Your old man runs the ward, don't he? And he feeds every hum in town around election, don't he? And that ain't—"

"Listen, fish-fins, you think you're smart. Come up on the pier an' I'll show you what my father'll do to your old—"

"Come on," I invited him. Like a flash I was slicing into the water and pulling for the ladder, right under the *Seaspray's* tail.

"Oo-oo, Fins! Oo-oo!"

**F**INS, that's me. Fins Scanlon. It was old Blair's kid, Linnet, hanging over the rail, waving down. She's a frizzy-bobbed doll that's always decked out in frilly stuff that whispered soft around her brown knees and made her look like a lily walking upside down. But she's a pretty nice kid, even if her old man was that stiff-legged oil punk, Blair. She'd sneak off the boat onto the dock once in a while when Chisel-face, her nurse, wasn't looking. She's okie-dokie even if she is a girl.

I was half out of the river, with water swooshing off me into Nicky Farlane's mush. He was fighting mad and he want-

ed to get up on the pier where he could use his mitts. So he was hanging pretty close to my tail.

I hung on with one hand and waved up at Linn. She waved back again, and I heard Nicky sputtering: "Ankle up, fish-fins. I'm gonna murder your guts!"

At the same time I heard feet scraping on the dock and those two mugs leaned over, like they wanted to see what the kid was waving at. It popped into my belfry that she was what they were leaning on the shanty, watching. From where I was hanging, they looked like big mugs, all right. I was getting an eyeful of the razor creases in their fancy duds and eyes pressed to a knife edge, stuck in faces hard enough to walk on.

Like I say, I was pretty good at water belly stunts, and I figured to flip a few just to show what I could do. First off, I sat down with a wet smack on Nicky's gasping puss and he glubbed under with a funny, strangled noise. The mugs hee-hawed, and I heard Linn let out a giggle. I grabbed up to a rung higher, then did a sweet little back-twist dive. I came up a ways over, waved at Linn, took a swift gander at the gawking gents, then ducked and swam under water right up to my bunk under the pier.

There was that hunk of shell that dazzled when the sun hit it. I had a crazy notion to take it out and try it. I waited a couple of minutes, then swam out under water and shot up right where I'd gone under, flashing the hunk of shell, making it look like I'd been way the hell to the bottom of the ocean to fetch it.

"What is that, Fins?" hollered Linn. "What you got there that sparkles like that?"

You should've seen the way those mugs stuck out their beaks when they heard her say that and then saw the flash in my hand. I guess they thought I had something, but it was only a funny little hunk of shell with a foolish dazzle.

"Catch!" I hollered up at her. I put my mitt behind my ear, ready for a quick throw. She was leaning over farther and farther.

I threw it, but I was a little wide and she had to reach fast. She reached and

she got it all right. The next thing I knew she was bringing it right back to me. She let out a strangled noise, went over the edge and down head first, looking like a blue lily—only a rightside up one. Her tiny face flashed by me before I had time to figure out anything except that she looked more surprised than scared. She splashed water all over me and the backside of the boat.

She came up out of it, sputtering and gasping. "I got it, Fins! I got it!"

I guess I musta looked disgusted. "Yeah, you got it. An' I bet you ketch hell from Chisel-face." I grabbed her.

She grabbed me right back, a strangle hold around my neck. "Can I keep it, Fins?"

"Hey, nuts, cut it—glub."

**S**HE dragged me down for a lousy mouthful of that water. I got busy then and hauled her over. I boosted her up the ladder. She looked like a kitten I once saw fall into a puddle.

"Oh, merciful heavens! Linnet, deah, are you all right?"

It was Chisel-face, cloudy white under the gills, leaning over the kid, with the two mugs standing by gawking. They sure looked like important big shots or something. They looked at each other and wagged their necks like they'd just found out the tide was in or something.

"Goodness, oh!" squeaked Chisel-face. "Maybe now I can convince your father he should anchor in mid-stream."

Linn looked at me; her teeth were chattering a little. I blinked. I had a funny feeling, like I was getting to be some potatoes and maybe I didn't even know my own strength or something.

"Can I keep it?"

"Aw, sure. Sure."

Chisel-face got excited. "Keep it? Keep what? What's all this, Linnet! What are you having to do with this dirty boy?"

Before I could muscle up to the old eaglebeak, somebody grabbed my arm. It was Nicky Farlane. "So you're crawlin', huh? Yella like your old man's buttons. Well, you ain't gonna crawl outta that shin-clip you give me. Think 'cause you're a fish in the water you can get away with

anything. So jis' like that I'm smacking you down, you—"

I went to town on this guy then, and when I got through he was spitting red.

When I got home I combed my hair down low, but it wasn't long enough to hide my eye. So when the old man got through with his cabbages, he lit a corn-cob and poured water from the kettle into a pan and eased his feet into it. He made a kind of a sighing sound, then looked close at me.

The old lady started clearing away the dishes. Every now and then she choked on the smoke from his pipe and glowered at him like she was fit to tear his guts. She's a sour sub for my real old lady that kicked off.

"Where'd you get the shiner, son?"

"Aw, pop, gee, lay off that, will ya?"

"None o' that, now. Where'd you get it?"

"A guy—a guy was sayin' t'ings about ya. T'ings I didn't like. So I worked him over."

"Ah!" The old man looked interested. "I hope you didn't hurt him much?" He said this like he meant: "I hope you busted his nose."

"Oh, a little here, a little there. A couple of teeth out, is all."

"Hab!" The old lady was standing still, listening. She was looking at the old man with a funny look. He said: "Was he bigger'n you?"

"Yeah. Nicky Farlane, you know—"

The old man's mouth flopped open, and the corn cob bounced out. The hot ashes spilled over his hand. "Nicky Farlane, you say? Ben Farlane's kid? You beat him—did that—teeth and all. Holy—"

He stopped and looked at me with a funny expression. His feet kept slapping up and down in the pan, sloshing the water over the floor.

"What's the matter?" I felt kind of shaky. I never seen him like this. He looked—if it wasn't the old man, I'd 'a' said he looked scared. "Wha'd I do, huh? I didn't do anything. Except give him what was coming—"

He let out a funny groan. "You bust the teeth loose from Ben Farlane's kid

and you tell me you didn't do anything. Oh—oh—" He looked like he was gonna choke.

I was getting kind of screwed up inside like I was tied in a blanket. I couldn't breathe right.

"Well, well, jeez, you're a big-shot cop, ain't you? Nicky was a wrong guy saying t'ings about you. You could arrest him, only I busted his jaw instead. You told me you don't think much of his old man. You ain't going to take guff from that cheap ward boss. Honest, that's what you said—only the other night. Well? So how'm I gonna figure it out? So where did I do wrong?"

THE OLD MAN looked at me, that's all. Stared without saying a word. He looked kind of helpless. It screwed me up tight—me never seeing him like this before.

Then the old lady starts to dish the beef. "Well, Patrick Scanlon, why don't you tell him? He's put it fair and square. Why don't you explain that a common beat-beater like you is just a lamh fry to big mucky-mucks like Ben Farlane? Why don't you tell the truth for once and admit you been playing big to your kid because he was the only one you could ever get to sop it up and believe you was a hero. Tell him you not only take guff, but you take orders from Farlane. And if he told you to hock his hoots, you'd have to do that, too. G'wan! Tell him!"

I didn't believe her right off. I was for the old man. So I looked at him hard, waiting for him to hlast her down with a string of those fancy words he can use; or else maybe just a hanging eyelid to let me know I shouldn't pay any attention to her. I felt like I was husting my chimneys with a fever; but I hung on and waited.

He sort of slumped down in the chair while she was hlasting at him, looking more and more like one of those big twisted sheets she wrings out and slaps down on wash day. When she spit out the last word, he didn't say anything, or give me any signal. He just sat there, his feet lying quiet in the soapy water,

his eyes staring down at them like they were a couple of dead mud turtles.

I don't know how long I kept giving him a hot, blinding stare. I didn't feel so hot now.

Jeez! I could see my old man shining Ben Farlane's number tens. It was a screwy idea, but something about the way she said it, and he took it, made me feel like I was choking to hell. According to her, the old man was just a small potato waiting for Farlane to fry him. How could that be? Jeez, he was a cop! And what was Farlane? Just a greasy punk that fed the huns around election, Jeez, the whole thing was screwy!

Then the old lady slaps the dishes down hard in the sink. She slams around and opens up again: "Look at ya! Just look at ya! And you after givin' the kid a load of fancy lather about the glory of upholding the law! You aren't upholding the law; you're upholding Farlane. It's the truth. Tell him. You're nothing but a heat-beeler. You couldn't squint at the left side of Farlane's britches without asking his permission."

When she got done she was shaking in ripples like the flag on the tail of the *Seaspray* when the wind is a certain way. Now, I figured, the old man would button her lip. But he just sat there.

So that's how it was. So the old man's just a fifty-cent flop, after all. So Nicky Farlane had it straight. Cops were flops. Jeez!

I rubbed my nose. It was running, or something. I figured it was maybe a cold. I never felt this way before. Like one minute I wanted to flop and shove my nose in the hay, and the next minute I wanted to go out and beat the guts out of about ten guys. Jeez!

I dragged my dogs out of there then and pulled them down the four flights like they were a couple of bags of cement. When I hit the sidewalk, I knew for sure it wasn't no dizzy nightmare. I wasn't going to wake up and find the old man stinging me with the razor belt. The air hit me, and I knew I wasn't dreaming about the old man being a fifty-cent flop; he wasn't going to play tag with me any more, the big four-flusher.

The street blinkers were on, but it wasn't quite dark yet. I headed for the pier with the river cooling off my face.

As soon as I came near the shanty, I saw that the *Seaspray* was gone. Chisel-face had lost no time getting Linn's old man to move out and park the tub in the river. It was nearly dark, but I could see it, laying out aways, with plenty of lights.

Then I saw two guys standing close, looking toward it, heads close and feet up on the edge beam. They musta heard me. They turned around, awful jumpy-like, and the big one said: "There he is now, the one with the educated flippers."

**I**T WAS those two important-looking mugs that was on the pier lamping the boat and my swimming.

"Hey, you. C'mere, kid."

"Aw, whatcha want?"

"You're the guy they call 'Fins,' ain't you?" It was the big one. He had a whooper of a jaw and ears like fried eggs.

"Yeah. What's it to ya?"

"Just like that," puts in the other one. He was soaking in cig smoke and talkin' it out through his lungs. He was pinch-cheested, like he'd never took a deep breath in his life. His flashy outfit fitted him like the shine on my old man's hilly. "Me and Slots here was just saying how a kid like you should ought to be in the dough with educated flippers like you—"

"Clam up, Buttons," hustled in Slots, the big one. "Lemme wise Fins up. It's this way, Fins. How'd you like to make ten hucks?"

"Ten hucks? Holy gee! What's the ketch?"

"No catch at all, Fins, honest. Least-ways, not for a water baby like you. Listen." Slots took a quick gander around to make sure there wasn't any snoops. It was pretty dark now, and you couldn't see very far. He leaned over and talked low.

"All you got to do is hang around till eleven. Then you swim out to that boat. You know, the one that was tied up here this afternoon, and sneak under the stern. You keep mum as a fish, get me? Not a peep. Pretty soon a package falls over the

rail, about so hig." He held his hands about six inches apart. "You grah it, duck under and swim out a ways so nobody can see you. Then you come up and head for that harge; that one over there."

I saw where he was pointing. A hig barge was gettin' towed up-river. I mean, that's how it looked. The tug was really only steamin' enough to hold ground. The barge wasn't moving hardly at all.

I gave Slots a fast once-over, looking wise. "What's in the box?" I wanted to know.

"Never mind that!" He sounded like he was all on edge, ready to jump out of his shoes. He kept looking up and down the pier. "Your job is to take it to the harge, and don't let anything stop you—nothing, do you get it? Then you take your tenner and scam."

"Oh, yeah? Says you! What about the cops?"

He grabbed a hunk of my shirt, jerked me around, slammed me up on my toes. I could feel his eyes hurmin' at me. "Whadda you mean by that crack, you little squirt?"

"Aw, lay off," I told him, husting loose. "You think I'm a dummy? You think I don't know it ain't on the up-and-up? Am I kicking, huh?"

He started to nod, slow-like. I knew now they were tough mugs used to important deals and stuff. I could learn plenty if I hung around. Boy, what a break! Getting in with hig mugs, just like that. Boy, I'd show the old man! The sniveling cop, spoutin' hahy-talk about the law—Aw, what a load of cripes I used to take offa him!

Slots looked like he was satisfied when he got through sizing me up. "I guess you'll do all right, kid. You're kinda smart. How'd you tumble?"

"Aw, that was easy. I seen you ducking my—ducking that brass huttons this afternoon when he come around the shanty." I almost said "my old man," hut I caught myself just in time. I was ashamed to give it out to these hig shots that I had a cop for an old man. They'd 'a' sissied me outta the fancy dough right off.

"Oh," said Slots, nodding his head,

"you keep your eyes open, too, eh? Stick to it, kid, and you'll get in the real dough some day. Now about this package. Don't let *anything* stop you from hringing it right over to the barge. I'll be waitin' for you. Get it?"

"Sure I get it."

"And one more little thing." He tightened up on my arm, and his voice got stiff and thin, like it was gonna choke off his wind. "You're a smart kid and I wouldn't want to see nothin' happen to you, see? So don't beef to nobody and don't take any side trips on your way out there. If you pull any monkey business with us, we'll give you the business quick, get it? You'll just be another hunk of garhage floatin' in the river."

When he got through, he stuck his hand under his coat and pulled out something that shone in the dark. He reached out and laid it against my neck under my ear. I shivered. It's a lousy feeling, gettin' cold steel on your hare skin.

Then he put the slicer away with a quick move like he had plenty of practice. He said: "Come on, Buttons. We got to fix about that launch."

I WASN'T exactly scared when I got out there in the middle of the river. But it was some different from the water right around the pier where I knew every inch of it. The lights on the shore looked a long ways away, and it was also a long ways to the bottom—I knew that.

I felt pretty good when I laid hold of the tall anchor chain of the *Sensaproy*. I hung on and waited.

Pretty soon there was a scraping noise, and then I seen a square shadow against the sky. It slid down a couple inches at a time, and then I saw a pair of thin arms, holding onto it. Like somebody was reaching out as far as he could so the splash wouldn't be so loud.

When I saw those thin arms, I thought of Linn falling over the edge this afternoon. But then, I told myself, it was screwy. She wouldn't be dropping the package—whatever he is.

I was glad it was coming. I was getting shivery, waiting in the cold water. I was

getting ready to grab it, figuring it would drop any second now.

Then a funny thing happened. The package dropped all right, but the arms came with it. After the arms came a swishing, kicking pair of small legs. The whole business sailed down and there was a splash. No screaming or shouting—just a splash.

A couple of strokes brought me over and I grabbed at the white box, floating on the water. There was a string tied to it. I pulled the string and grabbed a wrist. Then I had hold of the kid. It was her, all right. Linn.

A crazy feeling chased down the back of my neck then. She wasn't holding onto me or anything. She was all flabby, like she was asleep or something.

"Wake up, Linn!" I whispered, treading water. "Whatsa matter, Linn? Wake up!"

But she just stayed that way, with her eyes shut and her mouth open a little, with the river water running in and then running out.

I was getting awful cold. I opened my mouth to holler blue bloody blazes. Then I shut it quick. Jeez, I didn't know what to do. There was the package, and I was supposed to take it to the barge. Slots would slice me quick if I didn't.

And I didn't know what was going on inside this boat. The kid didn't just fall over—like she did this afternoon. I thought of old Chisel-face and what she would say as soon as her hawkeyes lit on me.

I was getting mixed up, trying to figure it out. Maybe I heard a noise then, like a foot scraping on wood, and maybe I imagined it. Anyway, all of a sudden I started swimming away from there. As I went along I thought, jeez, why don't I deliver the package, collect my dough, square myself with Slots? Then all I gotta do is swim back to shore and pull the kid out on the pier, and make out I found her right there in the water?

I felt good then. I figured I was pretty smart to dope myself out of a hot jam so quick. Maybe Slots was right. Maybe I'd cut into the big-time dough pretty soon.

For me it wasn't any trick at all to swim out to the barge with the extra load. The kid was awful small and light, and besides, she was all flabby, so she didn't get in my way. The box just floated along without any trouble, on account of it was tied with a strong string.

They musta been waiting for me on the barge. As soon as I got close, they reached down some rope and hauled us up.

It was pretty dark and shadowy. A guy with a big pair of arms grabbed hold of Linn. The white package was still tied to her wrist. He turned around and beaded for a kind of a shanty that was built on one end of the barge.

The other guy shoved me so hard I almost went on my beak.

"Hey, what's the idea, gangin'—" I started to growl.

"Shut up!" he muttered in a low, threatening voice. "Ankle inside."

There was a light in the shanty-house. The guy with the big shoulders dropped Linn on a bunk, in the middle of a lot of rubbish. It was Slots. He turned around.

"The kid's out."

"Croaked?" came back the one that shoved me. He was the pinch-cheested one—Buttons.

**S**LOTS looked like he was ready to bust somebody loose from his tonsils. "No—not yet. No—not yet at all."

I began to get cold. I didn't like the way these guys sounded. They didn't seem surprised or nothing at me bringing the kid.

"What about the box?" I piped up. "There it is. Ain't you gonna open it? How about my ten bucks? Gimme it, and then I gotta take the kid over and make out I hauled her outa the water by the pier. You see, she fell off the yacht—"

Slots let out a howl, like he thought I'd cracked a hell of a nifty joke. Buttons joined in, kind of half-hearted, like he was almost afraid of how to act. Linn moved and sat up, holding her head, like it was very sore. She was making little crying sounds, not loud, but you could tell she was cold and scared and hurt.

Slots stopped laughing. He turned

around and slapped her down into the bunk with the back of his hand. The kid's head smacked the wood, and she lay there all twisted.

I went kind of crazy then. I jumped at the mug's arm and grabbed hold. I jabbed my mouth at it and tried to sink my teeth. It was like trying to take a bite out of a rock pile. He yelled and smacked me one that skated me across the floor. I landed against a rickety stove and almost got crowned by a hot coffee pot. I tried to get up, grabbing at the stove. It burned my hand.

"Get away from that stove!" yelled the other guy, racing over and grabbing me. "It's got a busted leg! Cripes!"

I heard Slots grind out: "Chuck the two of 'em into the hold and lock 'em in. Then give that tug the once-over and tell 'em to give it all they got. We don't want to hang around this part of the river."

I was dizzy from that slam. But I got a load of Slots ripping the white box off Linn's wrist and chucking it into the corner. Jeez! I didn't know how to figure the lay, but I knew it was some kind of a gag. Slots wasn't even interested to open the box.

Buttons grabbed Linn up like she was an old spare tire. He gave me a kick that sent me staggering toward the door.

"Wait a minute." Slots came over to me, his eyes like red hot rivets. "You damn kid! Bite me, will ya?" Then he swung on me . . .

I didn't remember anything until I woke up with a funny, sour taste in my mouth and my bones aching like the old man had been using his razor belt on me for a week straight. It was dark and there was somebody leaning over me, dropping hot water on me, drop by drop. I heard a little whimpering sound.

I reached into the air and found a wet face. It was Linn. She was leaning over, and it was her face the hot drops were coming from. Tears.

"Aw, blow your nose or something," I growled at her.

"Fins. I'm scared! What are they going to do to us?"

I sat up. I was dizzy, and it was awful dark. The place smelled oily.

"We're down in the bottom of the ship. We're locked in! I'm scared!"

I got up, my head buzzing, and started to walk around in the dark. She stuck right on my heels. After a while I bumped my head against wood. It was a stairs. I climbed up until I couldn't go any farther. There was a big trapdoor, fastened down tight. I couldn't move it.

My knees were kind of shaky when I got down to the bottom again. I walked under the stairs and kicked something. It was an old broom. Jeez! What could I do with an old broom against those big mugs? I was beginning to feel pretty sick of myself for being such a smart guy to get into a jam like this.

"What a dopey boob," I said out loud. "I let those guys phenagle me with a lot of fancy malarkey about a package. And all the time they're working it to get you so they can bleed your old man for his dough. That's what! And I helped 'em. Jeez!"

Her hand held to my wrist tight. "You didn't mean it, Fins. I know you didn't mean it. Besides, suppose you hadn't been there when that awful woman threw me over?"

I jumped. "Chisel-face? You mean that old hag did it? Jumpin' pickerels! She must be in with these guys—"

"Sch! Somebody's coming!"

**I** PULLED her down close under the steps. There was a squeaking sound and then a light shone down. Some guy was coming down. He shone the light all around, and I heard him swear when he didn't see us. I held on hard to the broom handle, and when he got down near the bottom, his feet were a couple of inches from my face. I shoved Linn quick and stuck the broom handle through. He caught his leg on it and went down like a load of coal. The light smashed.

"Come on now!" I yelled at Linn. I started up the steps, with her right behind me. I heard feet running outside. As we climbed out on top, I yelled over my shoulder: "We got to jump for it!"

I guess I made a big mistake there. I just took it for granted she was like the

rest of the guys I go swimming with. We never thought anything of jumping off the dock. I went over the edge of the barge in a clean dive, not making sure that she did the same.

I came up and looked around. She looked around. She wasn't in the water at all. Then I heard a scream, a scream that was choked off before it got really started. I saw them then, the big guy and her. He was slapping her and swearing. I could see his lantern jumping and heard the slaps. I was on the side opposite the tug.

Then the other guy, Buttons, the one I tripped, popped out of the trapdoor. The next thing I knew, there were noises like shots and something was slapping the water all around me. I ducked quick and came up under the edge of the barge, right where they were standing.

"You damn fool! Shooting like that! Whadda you think I carry a knife for?"

"Suppose you'd missed him?"

"I never miss with a knife."

"Well, jeez, Slots, I was sore. The dirty little son of a monkey tripped me up and I damn near busted my nose."

"Serves you right. Suppose the cops heard—"

"Aw, cops, hell! What about the cops? Just a bunch of flops. Forget it."

"Forget it nothing. We got to be on the safe side. You got the boy and now I'm gonna finish the girl. Only it's gonna be a nice, clean knife job."

"Okay, only I gotta take a look at the coffee and stuff. That damned oil stove is clogged up or something. I'm hungry as a—"

"Never mind that. Open up that trap. We're gonna finish this job before we eat—"

I didn't wait to hear any more. I let go and started to pull along the side of the barge as hard as I could. I took a couple dozen strokes before I found a ladder. I climbed up as fast as I could and made a dive for the shanty house.

I knew they were going to kill Linn and I wanted to start something to keep them from doing it. I ran in and grabbed the coffee pot and threw it out through the door. It landed with a splash and a

lot of steam. I heard a shout and knew they were coming. There was a window behind the stove and I headed for it. Then I stopped. I had to figure out something to keep them busy. Spilled coffee wasn't any good.

Then I saw the rickety leg of the stove. I grabbed the edge of it and heaved. The stove went over and the frying pan went with it. It made a heck of a noise, but I didn't expect what came next. Oil splashed out all over the floor, and on my feet. There was a funny noise, like a fire-cracker going off inside a barrel. Then the oil was burning all over and the place was full of choking smoke. I yelled when my feet started to burn. I jumped to the window and climbed out, nearly falling on my head outside.

I slapped my feet where some of the oil was still burning. I got up and fell down right away. I couldn't walk.

On the other side of the shanty, I heard those mugs yelling. The inside of the shanty was all fire now, and they couldn't even go in.

I started to crawl along the deck. My knees got raw, but I got to the trapdoor. It was open. I went down on my knees because my feet were too blistered. I found Linn in a heap at the bottom of the steps. She moved and cried when I touched her.

"It's me—Fins!" I told her. "We got to get out quick!"

"I'm hurt all over," she whispered. "I feel awful hurt."

"Can you get up?"

"No. My leg is bent."

"Hang around my neck—like you did when you fell in the water. Hang on tight, now!"

I was thinking all the time I was going up those steps on my knees with Linn hanging onto my neck, how good that water was going to feel when my feet hit it. They were burning. Once I got her into the water with me, I knew I would be all right. I kept thinking about the water and that was how I kept on going.

WE GOT to the top after a while, and I started to drag her toward the edge. We couldn't move very fast.



The fire was brighter now, and it lit up the barge. I heard a yell that sounded funny above the cracking noise the fire made. Then somebody ran at us, and Slots grabbed me. I could see his face plain, now that the fire was so bright. He looked like he was crazy mad. He didn't say anything except: "This time we won't miss."

Buttons picked up Linn. They didn't talk to each other. They just started walking with us. I knew right away what they were going to do. They were walking toward the shanty. The fire was burning through the roof. I knew they were going to throw us both in there.

As we got nearer, the fire got so bright it hurt my eyes. I couldn't see any more. Then I felt myself going down and my burning feet hit the floor. I thought I was in the fire then, my feet burned so bad. But I was wrong. I was just falling on the floor of the barge. The bright light was a searchlight, not the fire.

Hell started to pop. Hell, with guns and all . . .

After a while we were sitting in a clean boat with a lot of shiny gadgets on the walls. Guys in snappy uniforms were running the boat and throwing some classy gab.

A guy in shirt sleeves was slapping gobs of grease on my feet and I was sitting close to Linn. Both of us were wrapped up in blue coats, with brass buttons.

Another guy in shirt sleeves handed us big tin cups with hot tea. The guy that was slapping the grease around looked up at me. It was the old man. He grinned at me.

"You did a swell job, kid," he said. "I followed you down to the pier and couldn't find you. Meanwhile the *Seaspave* short-waved H.Q., and before I could stutter me own name, the dock and the river were thick with radio cars and harbor patrol boats. We saw the fire break out on the barge and I hopped one of the harbor patrol boats. We headed this way and that's about all. Your boy friends are over there." He nodded his head.

I took a gander at those important big mugs, Buttons and Slots. They looked

like they'd been through a war or something. There was blood on their faces and arms. The old man grinned again.

"Us cops hate to take mugs like them without mugging 'em up a little. But don't worry. They'll be alive to stand trial."

"We got to give you credit, kid," said the other guy in shirt sleeves. "Only the fire started, we'd never of suspected this barge. You see, it's one of the Blair Oil Company barges—it belongs to this little girl's dad."

A guy in uniform came out of a little room then and he said: "The commish is on the air. I just gave him a full report and he wants to talk to the kid that set fire to Blair's oil barge."

The tea spilled on my wrist. "The what?"

"The commissioner."

"Aw, whadda ya tryin' to do, kid me?" I said.

"Hurry up," busted in the guy. "It's two-way short wave. We got all the equipment. Come on, you can't keep the commish waiting all night."

The old man picked me up like I was a basketful of the old lady's wash. He shoved me in the little room, and I took hold of the fancy gadget.

"H-hello."

"Are you Fins Scanlon?"

"Y-yeah." I gulped it out, the tea in one hand and the gadget in the other.

"So you're the kid that set fire to Blair's oil barge. What do you say about that?" he shouted at me.

"I won't do it again—honest—I—"

"What? You won't do it again?" He was slamming the words at me. "Well, I'll be—now, that is something! Listen, if you ever get into a jam like that again, and you don't burn the barge, I'll personally whale you. Listen, that was a mighty fine piece of work you did, and Blair is going to give you a nice reward—"

I JUMPED when he said that, and my foot kicked the table. "Listen," I busted in, "you got to know something. You haven't got the whole story. You see—I—well, this afternoon—"

I stopped right there because I seen my old man reaching to take off his belt. There was a dirty look in his eye. Then he grabbed the gadget away and started talkin' fast.

"Listen, Mr. Commissioner, this is Patrolman Scanlon. The kid's a little confused, talking to you and all. He's tryin' to tell you that the female nurse was in the plot. She was going to handle the shakedown. She'd been with Blair a long time and he trusted her . . . What's that?"

I heard it in a kind of hazy way. I guess the tea was getting into my eyes, making them watery. I knew what the old man was doing. He was covering for me because he figured I was hack on his side of the fence. He was covering me for taking that swimming job for Slots. He was coming through like a real pal.

"Say that again, commissioner? . . . Oh, I get it. You want me to dig up all I can about him? Okay. Okay, commish—commissioner."

He handed the gadget to the other guy and then he started smiling all over the

joint, like he was excited or nervous. He put out his hand and he took mine and shook it.

"Great boy! And you had to go and beat up Nicky Farlane! That makes it perfect. The D.A. is going before the Grand Jury next week to get an indictment against Ben Farlane on vote frauds. The commissioner wants me to testify because I been picking up everything I could in the neighborhood about Farlane's methods. He called me—do you know what he called me?"

I shook my head. I wasn't seeing straight.

"He called me—sergeant!"

I said something. I didn't say it very loud. It was like in a dream. My feet were hurting again like blazes. Like in a dream, one of the other guy's words floated up at me: "What did he say? What did the kid say?"

I guess I must've imagined the way the old man's face looked kind of proud. He said: "He made some remark about he was gonna beat up the next guy that said: 'Cops are flops.'"



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# Puppet Boss of Destiny



By Ernest Bean

*A perfect butler is supposed to know everything. James was a perfect butler. But he knew too much.*



the telephone. He listened carefully.

He heard her say: "Yes, dear, the new butler seems to be perfect. I'm very glad I engaged him."

AS HE approached the bedroom of Mrs. Norwood Fairbanks, James, her newly-hired butler, halted suddenly. Through the closed door he could hear his mistress talking on

James allowed a smile to flit across his expansive, but normally impassive face. So Mrs. Fairbanks thought he was a perfect butler, did she? Not surprising. All his list of clients had thought the same when he was in their employ. Each had later given him a glowing reference. Not one had dared do otherwise . . . . So she called the person she was speaking to "Dear." That merited attention.

Mrs. Fairbanks was saying: "I miss you so much, Norwood."

Merely a phone call to her husband, out West on a business trip. Not worth

while listening to such a conversation. He knocked on the door, a gentle knock considering his bulk.

James heard a few more words, followed by good-byes, and knocked again.

"Come in."

He entered the superbly furnished room and bowed to the still beautiful woman of forty who occupied it. "Your orders for the evening, madam."

She turned her dark eyes on him. "I'm dining out and going to a concert afterwards. I'll not return till late."

"Yes, madam."

Half an hour after Mrs. Fairbanks left the house, James re-entered her bedroom and approached her ornate Italian writing desk. Carefully he examined its intricate carvings.

His eyes gleamed as he located a secret drawer. From his pocket he drew a set of thin skeleton keys. The drawer was quickly opened. Only one thing lay in it—a packet of a dozen letters, tied with baby-blue ribbon.

He picked up the packet and thumbed it hurriedly. All in the same handwriting. He glanced at one, addressed to "Leona darling." The first name of Mrs. Fairbanks. Good, so far. Hastily he scanned ardent passages till he came to the signature "Angelo." Wonderful! That bore out what he understood before applying for the position. He had heard that Mrs. Fairbanks had not always been discreet.

James stuffed the letters into a capacious hack pocket. Before leaving the room, he glanced over his mistress' check book and made a mental note of the monthly allowance she received from her husband.

**E**ARLY THE NEXT MORNING he waited upon Mrs. Fairbanks. With a woebegone expression on his face, he let her glimpse a telegram which he partially drew from his pocket.

"To my regret, madam, I have just received word that my mother is very ill. So ill that I must leave for her bedside at once. May I, therefore, tender my resignation?"

"Your resignation—Why, I'm so sorry. I was quite well pleased with the way you were handling your work, James. Of course you may visit your mother. If you will be gone for a few days only, I'll keep the position open till you can return and resume your duties."

"There is no telling, madam, how long I must be away. I wouldn't want to inconvenience you for an indefinite period. However, I will promise to get in touch with you as soon as I do return."

On the following day, Mrs. Fairbanks received a phone call. "James Frye speaking, madam."

"I'm so glad to hear your voice. How is your mother? I hope she is well enough so you can come back now. As yet, I've engaged no one to take your place."

"Alas, madam, I fear I will never re-enter your employ. However, I hope this conversation means the beginning of cordial relations between us."

"Cordial relations between us?"

"Why, yes, madam. Do you recall certain letters which you were so careless as to leave in your writing desk? If you will examine that desk, you will see that they have been removed for safe-keeping."

He heard her gasp of dismay followed by "What!"

"Yes, Mrs. Fairbanks, I have placed them where they will be safe from your husband's eyes—under certain conditions."

"Conditions?"

"Simple ones. I will merely charge you a nominal fee for safe-keeping. It would give me great pleasure to add your name to others for whom I am keeping valuable documents—in your case for a hundred dollars a week."

"A bun—Why, that's outrageous! I couldn't possibly pay that!"

"I beg your pardon, madam, but I took the precaution of glancing through your check book. If you would cut down on your wardrobe—"

"Your demand is preposterous!"

"I doubt it, madam. I feel certain that your husband would pay—"

"No, no. Don't speak to him about those letters. I—I'll try to raise the money

somehow. I just don't know how, though."

"There are many ways, Mrs. Fairbanks. When I see you tomorrow, I will suggest some."

"You—you—"

"Don't say it, madam, or I will be tempted to increase my modest demands. Now as to the first payment—could you bring it to my apartment tomorrow morning? Say at eleven? At that time you will run no risk of meeting others of my regular clients."

"I—I guess I must. Where do you live?"

"At the Woodbine Apartments on Fiftieth Avenue. Seventh floor."

After he hung up the phone, James rubbed his hands together. She would make an excellent addition to his list of clients. From now on he need never play the part of a butler again. His income would enable him to retire and live the life of a gentleman.

**P**ROMPTLY at eleven the next morning, he heard a ring at the door of his apartment. He opened it and bowed. "Delighted to see you, Mrs. Fairbanks. Won't you come in?"

"For—for a moment." She seemed palpably nervous as she entered his living room. "I—I would like to speak to you about—about buying back those letters."

"I regret, madam, that those letters are not for sale."

"Not for sale? But please, James, those letters are so precious to me."

He permitted himself to smile. "And even more precious to me. Let us understand each other once and for all. I will not sell you those letters. I will merely act as their guardian for the small sum of one hundred dollars a week." It looked as if tears were about to flow. Brusqueness might stop them. "Have you brought the first payment?"

She bit her lip. Opening her purse, she drew out five twenty-dollar bills, and extended them towards James.

"Here is your blood money."

He raised one hand. "Please, madam, don't consider this payment in that light.

Please think of it as a mere gift of expiation."

A dangerous light flashed momentarily in her eyes. She opened her mouth, only to snap it closed. After a brief pause, she asked in a strained voice: "May I leave now?"

"Certainly, madam." He stepped towards the door. "Remember to return at the same hour next week."

"With another hundred dollars?"

"Not necessarily money." He was bowing her out into the hall. "For example, I recall you have a lovely Dresden china lamp in your living room. You could tell your husband that some careless parlor maid knocked it over and broke it into a hundred pieces. That lamp should add greatly to the appearance of my own living room. I would allow you—let me see—say, three weeks' payments in return for it."

She was in the hall now. "You—you—" With a great effort she seemed able to control herself enough to beg again: "Won't you please sell me those letters?"

"No, I will not sell them. That is definite. I will merely act as their guardian for the small weekly fee I mentioned."

She shook her head. "You have no heart."

He smiled again. "That is why I am a success in my profession."

Her eyes flashed fire, but she said nothing. With a shrug of her shoulders she turned to leave.

At that moment a man carrying a small suitcase approached from the direction of the elevator. Suddenly he dropped his suitcase and thrust a gun into James' stomach. "Up with your hands!"

James raised his arms at once.

The newcomer half turned to Mrs. Fairbanks. "Okay, lady?"

"Yes." She was smiling.

The man snapped at James: "Where's them letters?"

**J**AMES grinned. A big bluff on Mrs. Fairbanks' part of course. She couldn't stand the notoriety of a shooting or a slugging.

"What fools you both are! To think I would be careless enough to let precious

documents remain where they might be stolen. The letters to which you refer are perfectly safe in my box at the bank."

"Thanks for tippin' me off where they was at, you rat. Now come along with me and get 'em."

James was laughing by now. "Enough of this bluffing, my friends. Mrs. Fairbanks, this crude attempt to force me to deliver you the letters makes me insist on your bringing me two hundred dollars next week. Let this be a lesson to you. You might as well admit defeat and tell your boy friend to put away his revolver and leave. If he doesn't, I shall be forced to complain to the police."

"You're talkin' to one of 'em now, wise guy." The man's free hand pulled back his coat. "Detective Hayes from headquarters."

"What!"

"Sure." The detective slipped a pair of handcuffs over James' wrists. He turned to Mrs. Fairbanks. "Mighty brave of you, lady, to show up this here rat. Mighty few folks would've had the guts to do it. The department sure thanks you."

James sneered, "I'll be sorry for you,

madam, when those letters are published in the newspapers. I certainly would like to hear what your husband will say when he sees them."

That evening Mrs. Fairbanks was again telephoning her husband. "Who would have taken James for a crook? He was so efficient and so gentlemanly. Such excellent references, too. I'm beginning to wonder about the people who wrote them . . . I'm awfully sorry about the letters. I'm afraid people will be greatly amused when they read the ardent passages you wrote me when we were first married. Remember how you signed them 'Angelo' because it was the silly pet name I gave you on our Italian honeymoon? Now you'll have to write me some nice new letters to keep in my secret drawer till the police give me my others back."

After saying good-bye and hanging up, Mrs. Fairbanks locked the door leading to her bedroom. She pulled out the secret drawer of her writing desk. Her hand groped about in the cavity behind it. From there she drew a packet of letters tied with pink ribbon. Sighing, she kissed each letter, then consigned them to the flames in her fireplace for safe-keeping.



# Death Is Too Easy



By

**Arthur J. Burks**

Author of "Red Headed  
Hostage"

## CHAPTER I

### SLAB BAIT

**F**ID MERALT stepped out of the shadows a block from the hideout, when the coppers began to filter, like so many ghosts, into the bordering streets and alleys. Lieutenant Michaelson, leading the coppers, stared at Meralt's gray face with its deep-sunken eyes.

"You in again, Meralt?" said Michaelson. "I might have known. Working for the Manhattan State Bank?"

"Yes, Michaelson," said Fid Meralt. "And I earn my money. You huzzards tried for three weeks to run down the Nielsen mob that took Manhattan for

two hundred grand, and didn't get anywhere. The skipper of the hank called me in. I found the hideout in twenty-four hours."

"Sure they're in there?"

"Of course. I'm always sure. That's why I'm worth what I'm paid."

"You knock down more reward dough than any private dick in the business, he-sides retainers," said Michaelson. "A cop gets his salary. There's a difference."

"Are we here to compare pay days, or to go in after Nielsen and his men?"

Michaelson straightened, took a deep breath. "It looks like a tough layout."

"It is. Seven men in that shack. An arsenal of stutler guns and gats. And

*Blood had stained Private Detective Fid Meralt's past, and for ten horrible years that blood and a gruesome picture of a murder victim seared his brain and his soul. And now, when his atonement was almost complete, the past caught up with the present—and the famous detective had to learn that death is too easy an out.*

*Smashing Action  
Novelet*



every man who gets caught burns. So they'll die before they'll be caught." Meralt's face twisted into a queer, gray grimace.

Michaelson shivered. "Which means that somehow you'll see that everyone is taken alive, as usual. I don't think you'd shoot a hood if you had to save your life, Meralt. You'd rather take 'em alive, to burn!"

Michaelson would have sworn, watching Meralt, that the man was in abysmal terror of what he had to do—if he hadn't

known that Meralt feared nothing human. Meralt was an enigma. Even his name was strange. Michaelson wondered about it. Fid Meralt! Extended by reporters to "Death-house" Fid Meralt.

Michaelson decided that he'd rather have almost any name but that, grimly famous though it was. Michaelson was Irish, and human. Meralt, a devil with hell in his eyes.

"I'll lead the show, as usual," said Meralt. "That was understood when I phoned headquarters."



Michaelson grinned, then nodded.

"All streets blocked off!" asked Meralt.

"Yeah."

"Then Nielsen knows that the cops are here. There's no use waiting. Signal your men to keep under cover and close in. Gas masks. Blast the windows out first. Then drop tear-gas bombs. Let's go!"

Meralt was halfway to the hideout before Michaelson realized he had gone. Michaelson signaled for the charge. Stutter guns covered the zigzag course of Meralt, who made the steps just as lead sprayed the door. Then Meralt lunged against the tough wood, was through the battered entrance. Michaelson was fifty feet behind, running heavily. He listened for the gats of Fid Meralt, tried to see through the white smoke.

His men were masked monsters, approaching the shack of Bats Nielsen. High above the pandemonium rose the shriek of the mob leader.

"Meralt's coming! Get that guy!" His voice was choky, labored, through the tear-gas fumes.

"Every rat knows him," thought Michaelson, "and why he isn't on a slab, years ago, is beyond me—"

There were two sharp reports, right on the heels of Nielsen's scream.

Michaelson said to himself, "Got both of Bats' arms, if I know anything about Fid Meralt."

A scream from the shack was Michaelson's answer. Then Nielsen's hysterical shout: "You won't get away with it this time, Death-house Meralt!"

**A** TOMMY chattered shrilly for a second. Michaelson, going through the door, his men holling in after him, heard the tommy clatter to the floor in the midst of its burst. In a few moments, he knew, the gangsters would be helpless under the gas attacks. One spitting shot sounded, breaking the rhythmic chattering of the tommy.

"That time he smeared the gun-hand of the tommy artist all over the cartridge drum!" muttered Michaelson. He was a little surprised to discover that he was more interested in Fid Meralt and

his doings than in the fact that he and his men were about to effect a capture that would make their names ring around the country.

Michaelson reached the head of the stairs in time to see a strange, awesome tableau. Two men were sprawled behind the windows in the hallway, knocked down by the fire of coppers from outside. Four others were down, groaning, kicking, their breaths coming in gasps, thin faces streaming with tears. Fid Meralt was facing Bats Nielsen. The latter was staggering through a door. Fid Meralt was heading straight for him. Michaelson, watching, wondered if Nielsen still was able to use the gun held in his hands. He could have snapped a shot at the mob leader, but somehow, with Meralt there, it seemed the natural thing to let him handle it.

Meralt's gats dropped to the floor, even as Nielsen's all but came into line. Michaelson started to lift his own revolver when Fid Meralt moved.

His right foot shot out, kicking Nielsen's gat spinning. It exploded as Meralt kicked, but the bullet went into the wall. Then Fid Meralt stepped in.

He swung his right fist in a deadly, high-looping arc. The fist crashed against the face of Bats Nielsen. Bats went down. He tried to rise again. He choked through his tears as he cursed Meralt.

"Damn you! Damn you, Meralt!" he said. "Why can't you kill a man decently? Do you get a cut on the executioner's C and a half?"

Then Michaelson fastened Bats Nielsen's wrists together with the cuffs. His coppers cornered the other members of Bats' mob. Two were dead, by fire from outside. But five, including Nielsen, would live to burn. Michaelson felt a little cold. He always did, after watching the work of Fid Meralt.

Meanwhile Fid Meralt was walking away from his latest coup as though the devil were at his heels. Hell's fire burned in his heart. In the eye of his mind he looked at a picture that was all of ten years old: the picture of a man clawing at his face, staggering back, spinning to a fall on the carpet of his office, with a

bullet in his head—a bullet fired by Fid Meralt.

Only then his name had not been Fid Meralt. It had happened in a far-city, Seattle. He hadn't been a dick then. He'd been a twenty-year-old kid, and he had killed a man—a surgeon named Dean Clift.

And several times a day, or whenever he closed his eyes, since that time, he had seen Dean Clift stagger back, spin, and fall, hands clawing at his face.

And he saw something else: a man drop through the trap of a scaffold, breaking his neck in accordance with the verdict of a jury, the sentence of a judge. That man had been hanged for the murder of Dean Clift.

And that man had not been Fid Meralt! Nor had Fid Meralt saved the other man from hanging!

Two pictures. The man who had been slain, in his staggering, spinning fall; and the one who had paid for the crime with a black cap over his head and a noose around his neck. Meralt hadn't seen that, not actually, but in imagination.

Meralt could never forget. That's why he almost ran away from the scene of his latest triumph. Why he could never tell anybody, even Michaelson, that every time he leveled his gaze at a killer, he saw Dean Clift in his place—and shot the killer in arms or legs to keep from watching another staggering, spinning fall. He'd shot one man to death; he'd never shoot another.

"But merciful heaven," he moaned. "I let another man go to the scaffold for killing Clift. And nobody knows how many I have sent to the chair instead of drilling them. Why in hell do I stick with this racket when it keeps me always on the verge of insanity?"

He didn't need to ask that, really, even of himself. For he knew.

And what he also knew was yet a third picture. Remembering it, he calmed down, and something of peace came back to his face. It always did, when he remembered that third picture. He slowed his walk. Finally he signaled a taxicab, gave an address. The address was that of Jerome

Collings, president of Manhattan State Bank.

A butler answered his ring, looking sleepy.

"Get Collings," said Fid Meralt.

"But it's after one o'clock—"

"Get Collings! Or do I have to get him myself? I'm Fid Meralt."

The butler's face seemed to spread as he stared at Meralt. Then he hurried away, looking back over his shoulder, pulling on his coat as he went. In a minute he was back.

"Mr. Collings will be right out, sir."

When the big, iron-gray, craggy-browed bank president appeared, in pajamas and dressing gown, Fid Meralt said: "I've finished that job. I've come for my money."

Collings' eyes widened. "Don't you think I'm good for it? Can't you wait until morning?"

"Give me the money," snapped Fid Meralt. "Fifteen grand! We got the whole mob, and all but ten grand of the dough they took. I told you I'd want my dough the minute I'd earned it."

"Well, you certainly must want it badly, indeed, to get a man up at one-fifteen—"

"I do," said Fid Meralt, "damn bad!"

He got his money.

On the street again his face was almost peaceful.

"Maybe money will never do the trick for her," he thought, "but if it will, I'll find it, no matter how much is needed! I wonder if she is awake?"

But he knew she was. She almost always was. That was because her suffering almost never gave her rest. His face was gentle as he gave her address:

"Center Hospital, cahhy, and step on it!"

**FID MERALT** met the eyes of the girl at the desk, a question in his own. She smiled at him. She'd known him too long to be surprised at the time he chose for his visits. She held a newspaper in her hands. She had looked up from it at him. "No news about you in a long time, Mr. Meralt," she said.

Meralt's face was gray. He thought of what the papers would call him, Death-house Fid Meralt. "If that's the sort of stuff you like to read," he said harshly. Then he turned hard, inquiring eyes on the girl. "Does she ever read about it?" he snapped.

"No. We obey your orders. Besides, they're doctor's orders, too. She must not be excited. Poor thing! Almost ten years of it!"

"But it won't be much longer," said Fid Meralt savagely. "There must be some physician . . ."

There was pity in the face of the nurse. She almost shook her head, would have, if she hadn't been afraid of the mad light in his eyes. Fid Meralt might forget himself and strike her if she even hinted that it was hopeless.

"You don't believe it, do you, nurse?" he said in a low voice. "But I know there's a chance. I'll give anything—my life—"

The nurse's eyes were misty. "If love could do it, she would have walked out of here years ago."

"Love?" repeated Meralt, looking stupid. "Love? I don't understand."

"I mean," said the girl, who had gone too far to retreat, and knew it, "that you must love this girl with all your heart and soul to do so much for her."

"Love her? Love her?" he repeated. "Why, it never occurred . . . Listen, nurse, has anybody ever said anything of the kind to her?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. I'm not the only nurse on duty here."

"Well, if anybody ever does—" His voice was fierce.

"We're not gangsters, Mr. Meralt," said the girl grimly. "You can't talk to us like that."

Meralt approached her, stared down at her. She met his eyes without flinching. "Forget it," he said, gruffly, "you can't possibly know how I feel, or why, or—or anything."

Her hand shot out, covered his, whose knuckles were white, on the desk.

"I understand," she said softly. "She's awake, if you wish to go in."

"Go ahead, please. I don't like to surprise her."

A bit later the girl beckoned from the door. She was smiling. Her eyes were big with sympathy. Fid Meralt, holding his hat in his hands, stepped into the private room. The nurse went out, closed the door softly behind her.

Meralt looked down at the girl on the bed. For a full minute he didn't say anything. Just stood there and looked at her. The girl's eyes met his. Hers were deep and blue, in a face that was startlingly white. Her hair was spread back over her pillow, as though to frame her face. Her lips were smiling.

"Ye gods," said Fid Meralt, "you're the loveliest thing alive!"

Now her eyes danced, and her smile was bigger.

"You never fail me, Fid," she said. "I always wait for you to stand there, and devour me, and say just that. I'd die if you didn't, even though I know it's part of the game. I think I live on it. It's a lot better than the food I get here—"

"The food isn't good?" he asked quickly. "If they don't give you the best—"

"Never mind, Fid," she said. "I was just using a figure of speech. Everything here is of the best, always has been. There's no better in the world. But to see you—the only one who comes—"

"I could tell others to come, if you need them."

"You're so afraid I won't get my least wish granted, aren't you, Fid?" she laughed, her voice sounding like music. "But the nurses are enough, and I've been here so long that they're my family, you know."

HE DROPPED into a chair beside the bed, after staring as though he could never get his fill of her.

"It's never a game," he told her, "and I do want you to have everything you want. I really, honestly and truly, do believe you're the loveliest woman in the world."

She stared into his eyes for a moment. "You do love me, don't you, Fid," she said, finally, "with all your heart?"

She said it so simply that he was stricken dumb. She'd never said it before. He could feel himself going white.

"Why, Fid," she said, reaching a hand to him, "I do believe you're scared. Didn't any other woman ever surprise you like that? Why, Fid, I've known for a long time that you loved me, and—"

He fought for control, his eyes still on the face of Lela Prague. Just what could he say to her, anyhow? He'd told her so many lies, about the money he spent, trying to make her well. It all came from her brother's share in his business, he had told her. That had been long ago, and she had come to accept his help as her due. Or so he thought, so he hoped.

"And what?" he said.

"I love you, Fid. I think you might have known it, all along. But with me lying here, as I am—"

He gripped her hand tightly. "Please," he said, "don't talk about it."

"But I have to, Fid. You see, I'm always reading up on things—you know, things like what's the matter with me, and always talking with the surgeons who come in, and are my friends. I don't think I'd ever tell you, Fid, about loving you, if I didn't think there was a chance."

"A chance?" he repeated stupidly.

"Yes. Some foreign surgeon, a man with magic in his brain and in his hands. He's very expensive, Fid. Doctor Lanning wrote him about me several times, giving all details. He has been interested. He's coming here, to New York. He offers some hope. He told Lanning he thought he might be able—"

Fid Meralt sat back, releasing her hand. His shoulders were shaking, his hands opening and closing.

"Why, Fid," she said, "I thought you'd be happy. I tell you I love you, and it scares you to death. I tell you there's a chance I may get well, so that we can really be together, like a couple of people in love should be, and you get more scared than ever. Just what in the world?"

"I'm happy, happier than words can express, Lela," he almost whispered it, "that you may walk again! I'droh hanks to get the money. I'd steal—"

She laughed a little. "My brother's ownership in your business wouldn't go

far enough, then? Fid, do you suppose I'd have taken money from you, all these years, if I hadn't believed there was some hope? Do you think I ever really believed that my brother had any claim on you? I knew my brother—"

Her face clouded. For a moment she looked away into some far distance. Her eyes were wide, and Fid Meralt knew that she was seeing pictures, too. He touched her hand, shaking her a little. She looked back at him.

"He never mentioned any friend named Fid Meralt, nor even spoke of any legitimate business. But when I first accepted help from you I wanted to believe it, wanted it more than I wanted to be well. Do you know why?"

He knew why, well enough, but he waited for her to tell him, because he couldn't trust himself to speak.

"Because he never did what they accused him of. I'm sure of it! If I get well enough to get around, I'll prove it! And you'll help me, Fid, because you're a smart man, and we'll clear his name, even if we can't bring him back. You understand, don't you, that with that in my mind I'd accept money from the devil himself, if there was a chance of getting well?"

"I understand, Lela," he whispered through white lips. To himself he thought: "You did take money from the devil!"

But enough of this. He had to keep on, playing his string out. So he smiled at her, patted her hands.

"I'll turn handsprings clear around Central Park, darling," he said, "the day you stand alone. And whatever you do. I'll help you do."

"But even with all my hinting, you wouldn't admit you love me!"

She expected to be kissed, he could see that. But if he kissed her—In a flash it came to him. He could pretend to be shy. A good dick could pretend anything.

SO HE fled from her in apparent confusion, and her delighted laugh followed him through the door. He closed the door behind him, turned and stared at it without seeing it, for a full half min-

ute. Under his breath he was saying: "Damn . . . damn . . ."

The nurse at the desk touched his arm. "Are you drunk?" she asked, suspiciously.

He whirled on her. "I? Drunk? If I only were! If I only were, so that I couldn't think, feel—"

He clapped his hat on his head, stalked past the nurse and out, onto the street again. Through his head ran the words: "I love you, Fid . . . I love you, Fid . . ."

They were like red-hot whiplashes being drawn slowly across his heart.

He worshipped the ground Lela Prague walked on. He hadn't known it until tonight. Up until now it had been expiation, the desire to atone that drove him like a host of furies.

That she took it for granted that if she were well, they would be together, was worse still. Her words repeated themselves in his ears, and in his heart the words he would have said had they been possible, made answer.

"Where now, Fid Meralt?" he asked himself. "Where now?"

Those pictures, trooping again—especially the picture of the man who had dropped through that grisly trap, with a noose around his neck and a bag over his head, in payment for the murder of one Doctor Clift.

That man's name had been Dartt Prague, brother of Lela Prague.

And Lela did not know Fid Meralt's part in that.

## CHAPTER II

### MURDER'S HOLE-CARD



FID MERALT knew that Doctor Janus Dineen, from Budapest, was in Center Hospital, that he would examine Lela Prague, might even now be examining her, making up his mind. Ten years was a long time. The limbs of an invalid might be beyond help

in less time than that. Fid Meralt had been told so by a dozen physicians.

But Janus Dineen was a worker of wonders.

So he hadn't slept for two nights, thinking ahead, wondering what would become of Lela, and of himself. He hated himself because, deep down inside, he knew that he would be relieved if Dineen said that Lela's case was hopeless. Then he could go on until one or the other of them died, waiting on this sister of the man who had dropped through the trap in Fid Meralt's place. Meralt had given a nurse a hundred dollars. She was to telephone him the first chance she got, after she found out what the great medico had to say.

And while he waited, he refused to take on any new business. Dineen would want a lot of money just for his opinion. Much, much more if he successfully operated on Lela Prague. He had crossed the ocean specifically to see Lela and he would have to be generously recompensed. Meralt needed every dime he could raise. Yet he refused all cases.

He hardly paid any attention when Herbie Clanson knocked over two hanks—Herbie Clanson, cleverest and most deadly of all handit leaders. He had just one thing in mind. Why didn't the telephone ring?

As though in answer, it did ring. He licked dry lips with a trembling tongue. In a few seconds now he would know whether Lela Prague must stay in bed for the rest of her days, or walk out, a free woman.

Then, as he took down the receiver, he thought: "I can get killed in some fight, after I've piled up enough dough to last her for the rest of her life. That would be best."

He spoke fearfully into the receiver. "Yes?"

"Fid Meralt?"

Fid Meralt sighed. It wasn't the nurse's voice. It was a man's voice.

"Yes, Fid Meralt, but I'm not taking on any new cases just now."

"That suits me fine, Meralt," said the voice at the other end of the wire. "For

I was just going to tell you not to take on one certain case . . ."

Fid Meralt started to bang up the receiver when two words, a name, snapped in his face like twin pistol shots:

"Ben Pitney!"

THE ace private dick did not hang up the receiver, though he almost dropped it. His eyes seemed to go deeper into his head. His face, because it could not become grayer, twisted and writhed in agony. He fought for control of his voice.

Finally he said: "Talk!" It was the only word he could get out, and his voice sounded strange, horrible. The man on the other end of the wire laughed.

"I thought that would get you, Meralt!" the voice said. "The police haven't a chance of getting me if you stay out of it. They haven't the brains. I can stay holed up where I am for a long time. It'll be worth it—the haul was two hundred thousand."

"Go on!" snapped Fid Meralt.

"I'm Herbie Classon. That's all the facts the police have."

Fid Meralt tried to remember, couldn't. The name meant nothing to him. Only one name had meant anything, these last two days: Lela Prague. And right now maybe the nurse was trying to get him. There was a clicking on the wire, as though somebody was trying to get either himself or the other man.

"I don't understand," said Meralt. "I haven't been watching the papers."

"Been too much interested in the visit of Doctor Janus Dineen, eh?"

Fid Meralt was like a man turned to stone.

"What has that to do with you?"

"Simply this: you will be offered twenty thousand dollars, within an hour, to run down me and my gang. You'd better lay off."

"If I don't?"

"Two things will happen. Lela Prague will be removed from any possible help she might get from the doctor from Budapest, and while so removed she will be

told that Ben Pitney, who killed Dean Clift, and Fid Meralt are one and the same."

"Hell, that would kill her!"

"That's your lookout, Meralt. Play ball and you're still Meralt as far as I'm concerned. Come after me, and both of you get the works. Neither of you means anything to me—as long as you mind your own business. Good-by, Meralt Pitney!"

Fid Meralt clung to the receiver until the operator snapped at him three times, with increasing vexation: "Number please! Number please!" Then he hung up, and he seemed to have aged five years, five eternities. He was like a man out on his feet from a terrific blow to the jaw.

Now, if Dineen said there was a chance . . .

His telephone rang again. He licked his lips once more. It could bring him no shocking surprises now. He'd been dealt the greatest blow that could be sent his way. He took down the receiver. Lela Prague's lilting voice came to his ears. He could tell the answer by the joy there was in it.

"You bribed the nurse, darling, I know," she said. "But I wanted to tell you myself. I had to, Fid, Fid, I've got a chance! It will cost a great deal of money, but if we can get it—"

"How long?" asked Fid Meralt.

"Six months, if he starts working right away. Six months of my time. But what are six months, after I've spent ten years like this. Fid, aren't you happy for me? For us?"

"Yes, Lela, with all my heart. Now you can—"

"Now I can come to you, and then, together, we'll dig out the truth about Dartt. He was innocent. He was guilty of many things, but never of murder. I must prove it."

"Yes, yes, of course. How much does Dineen need?"

"About fifty thousand for the whole job. He says I'll need special attention the whole time. Nurses, attendants, expensive apparatus. And, of course, including the operation. He's a world-famous

man, and he can really command any fee. People pay it gladly, if they can. Can we, Fid?"

"Yes, Lela," he said. And he wished he was as sure as he made his voice. In his business, he could never be sure when his earnings would stop, when his breathing would stop. He had no insurance, he was worth no company's risk. He would have to get the money right away—all of it—in case— "Yes, Lela. We'll get the money."

"He wants to start Monday. That's three days from now."

"I'll have the money. I have some of it now."

"You're a great, fine friend, Fid Meralt," said Lela Prague. "I know, down in my heart, that you're just as eager as I am, to have the name of my brother cleared."

"Yes," said Fid Meralt, "I am." And only Fid Meralt knew how deeply he lied. Why had he gone conscientious, when he had heard, almost ten years ago, what Dean Clift had done to Lela Prague? Why had he maneuvered so carefully, hiding his tracks always, to get her to New York, there gradually to satisfy her that she had a right to the money he spent on her care?

Blood money. Not Lela's blood, but the blood of Dartt Prague, and of Dean Clift. That he hadn't known about Prague, when he had been hiding away, and sorrowing over Kathleen, didn't help.

He hung up.

**T**HERE CAME a knock on the door. Dazedly Fid Meralt made the knock-er enter. He half expected Herbie Classon. The man had nerve enough, was sure he had Meralt where he wanted him. Meralt's hand hovered close to his gat. Pray heaven it was Herbie Classon. This time he'd shoot to kill.

If Classon whirled, staggered, spun and fell, with his hands covering his bloody face, it wouldn't weigh on Fid Meralt's conscience. But no, that wouldn't do. Classon wouldn't come without leaving a hole card somewhere that some one else could use if Fid Meralt put a bullet in him.

"I said, are you really Fid Meralt?"

Meralt looked into the impatient face of a big, pompous man, on whom wealth was written large. Meralt stared at him.

"I'm Meralt. I guess I was thinking of something else."

"You must have been. I've spoken to you twice."

Meralt didn't say he was sorry. He merely looked at the other man, knowing who he was before he spoke.

"I'm Jacob Weiner, president of—"

"I know. Chief of the two hanks that were robbed by Herbie Classon and his moks."

"Yes. I see you know the case. Will you take it on?"

"I don't know. Why don't the police—"

Weiner, still standing, sneered. "The police haven't brains enough to get Herbie Classon. He knows it; they know it. The police never have got him. How much?"

"All the traffic will bear."

"You'll take it on?"

"Yes. Thirty-five thousand dollars if I get the moks within ten days, forty if I do it in a week, fifty if—"

"Preposterous!"

"Fifty if I do it within forty-eight hours!"

Weiner exploded. Fid Meralt studied him, with little interest. The man would squawk, but he would pay up. Otherwise he'd lose all that Classon had taken. He knew it. Fid Meralt knew it. Weiner threw up his hands.

"I'll pay."

"Within half an hour of the capture, at your home?"

"What if you are killed?"

"Then the money goes to a girl whose name will be found in my wallet!"

"Shall I take the full ten days?" Meralt's lips were twisted into a strange grimace.

"No! Classon can spend twice the difference in that time!"

"Okay. Forty-eight hours."

Fid Meralt didn't see the hand that Jacob Weiner extended to him. Weiner snorted, went out, trailing smoke from a rich cigar in his wake. Some hung on Meralt's side of the door long after Wein-

er had gone. Fid Meralt wondered if the smoke from hell's fire was a grayish blue . . .

Meralt left his office, and did something that made a telegraph gal's eyes pop out. He telegraphed fifteen thousand dollars to Lela Prague, at Center Hospital.

"I could live a month on what this costs you," said the girl. Then she noticed the signature. "You're Fid Meralt, the—"

He seemed to punish himself with the fierce answer: "Yes, Death-house Fid Meralt! Is that what you want me to say?"

Then he went out, hating himself because he had been rude to the girl. He looked at his watch. If he were definitely going after Herbie Classon, he was losing time. He'd already lost half an hour. And when Lela got the money she'd be worried, wondering why he hadn't brought it in person, what had caused him to do such a queer thing as telegraph it.

The telephone was ringing when he went in. It was too soon for Lela to call him. She hadn't had time to receive the money yet. His face was a mask as he took down the receiver.

"Fid Meralt!"

"Classon again, Meralt," came the hated voice of the gangster. "I note that Jacob Weiner came to see you?"

"So what?"

"You took his offer?"

**N**O GOOD would come of lying, even if Fid Meralt would have humiliated himself by lying to the murderer. If Classon had known that Weiner was going to approach him, he also knew that Weiner's offer had been accepted. Classon wasn't the first, nor would he be the last, handit-murderer to have friends on the inside, friends who would never be suspected, no matter what happened.

"Yes. Fifty grand if I get you in forty-eight hours."

"I'll give you fifty grand if you'll lay off."

"How?"

"I'll telegraph it."

Hope was beginning to dawn in the eyes of Fid Meralt. He would do even

this for Lela Prague. But he knew he wouldn't. She'd find out, because he would tell her. Then she'd hate him to the end of her days.

"Getting scared, Classon?" said Meralt.

"I don't underestimate you, Meralt," said Classon. "I'm still in business after ten years, because I use my head. Well, what's the answer?"

"I'd rather take Weiner's dough."

"Then it's a hattle?"

"Yes—to the end."

"No Death-house stuff this time, eh, Meralt? You'd rather take me dead, so I couldn't talk. Well, hop to it. I've figured that out, too. The second newspapers hit the street saying that I'm rubbed out, a letter is dropped into a mailbox. Know who it'll be addressed to?"

"Yeah. Lela Prague."

"You're right, and everything you don't want her to know will be in it!"

"How do you know so much, Classon?"

"You a dick, and can't figure out a simple thing like that? I knew, when I planned opening here, that you were king of private dicks. I wanted to find out things about you. I've as good an organization as the dicks themselves. I checked back on you, for ten years. Fid Meralt! Shall I keep on talking?"

"No, there's no more to be said. Do your damndest, Classon, for I'm going to do mine!"

Classon laughed grimly as he hung up.

Meralt took a cab, and his eyes scarcely blinked as he rode to the hospital.

The girl at the desk told him that he might go right into Lela's room; that she was expecting him, to explain a telegram he had sent her. That she was worried, knew he would know she was worried, and would come right away to explain.

Fid Meralt stepped through the door, closing it softly behind him. He screwed his lips into the usual formula, his face into a smile.

He was all set to say: "Ye gods, you're the loveliest thing on this earth!"

But he didn't say it. He saw the lower limbs of a woman protruding from be-



hind the screen which sometimes surrounded Lela's bed. The woman's toes were sticking up. He caught a glimpse of the lower hem of a starched uniform.

He sped around the curtain. First, he saw that the nurse was unconscious, and that there was a huge lump on her head. She was breathing stertorously.

Fid's eyes went to Lela's bed. It was empty.

She was gone. She wasn't anywhere in the room or its closets. He looked frantically in all of them. Somehow Lela had disappeared, and the girl at the desk outside didn't even know. Classon had acted with the speed and efficiency of a well-planned organization. The man hadn't been fooling. But how had he done it? The room was on the third floor. If Lela had been taken out the window, some persons would have seen it from the sidewalk bordering the hospital grounds.

"His men could have been painters," thought Meralt, "working the side of the building. Anybody who saw them would have thought some one else had put them on the job. They were at Lela's window at just the right time. She had a visitor, some one probably with information about Dartt Prague, or even about me. Then the nurse was slammed, Lela was bound, gagged, pushed out onto the painters' platform, taken down. Wrapped in canvas . . . Yes, that must be, how it was done."

Fid Meralt sped from the room, out of the hospital. As he left the outer door he heard a wild scream from the floor he had left. Some one, a woman, probably the nurse at the desk, had gone into that room, found the other nurse knocked out, and Lela Prague gone.

They'd be after him, as the last known visitor, to ask questions. And he didn't want to ask any, or answer any. He knew. Now, all he had to do was find the hideout of Herbie Classon and his men. Lela would be there, somewhere.

Fid Meralt did not return to his office. The police would be there, to ask those questions. And Classon's shadow or shadows would be around somewhere, watching developments.

## CHAPTER III

### HIDEOUT



**M**ERALT pulled his hat over his eyes, lounged on a corner close to his office, studying other loungers, passersby, everybody—seeking a face that might be

that of the shadow. The minutes dragged on. Lela was probably going through hell right this minute. Maybe Classon had even killed her. It was certain that this man never made idle boasts. By now he had told Lela Prague about Ben Pitney. What had the knowledge done to her?

A man came up to Meralt, a cigarette in his mouth.

"Gotta match, buddy?" he asked.

Scarcely realizing what he did, Meralt struck a match for the stranger.

The fellow said. "Thanks, Meralt. Don't go for a gat. I'm your only connection. Call this number. If the cops get it, something happens to some one you're interested in—something worse than has ever happened to her before."

There was amused contempt on this man's face as Meralt took the piece of paper. The man walked down the street, making no attempt to hurry nor to guard his back against attack. He didn't even look around. Fid Meralt, like a man in a nightmare, looked at the slip of paper.

The telephone number wouldn't mean anything, he knew. It was probably located miles from Classon's real hideout. But he stepped into a cigar store, dialed the number. He heard the click of a receiver. A man laughed.

"Hello, Meralt. Good job, wasn't it?"

"Classon, if you harm a hair of that girl's head. If you set her back one damn little bit—"

Classon laughed. He was highly pleased with himself. "I won't harm her. I like the kid. And she can't very well fight me."

"What do you want?"

"Uncover the exits from New York City. Give word to the newspapers that

TDA

you're sure I've gone to Detroit or Chicago, or some place, and that you're going after me."

"And if I do?"

"The minute I'm across the river I'll send for an ambulance to go to the right place and pick up Lela Prague."

"Is she all right?"

"Yes. She'll tell you so herself."

Fid Meralt's heart was cold as he waited for Lela's voice over the wire. When it came, he was a man turned to stone. Her voice was like ice, cold, hard, uncompromising.

"I want no help of any kind from you," she said. "I never want to see you again. I'd rather die with these men than owe you for my release. I wish there were some way to pay you back every penny—"

Then Classon's voice cut in, laughing.

"Women are fiery, aren't they, Meralt? But I like 'em that way. Well, Meralt, what about it?"

"Simply this," said Meralt through set teeth, "I'll see you in hell before I make any deal with you."

"Okay with me, Meralt. I can stay where I am for a long, long time if I have to—and I like the company."

Both men clicked up. Meralt kept thinking. "He's told her. And it didn't kill her. She hates me more than anything in this world. Now she knows the truth about Dartt—and the desire to find it out was what made her want to get well. Now she doesn't care. When she's free of Classon, she'll tell the world. I don't blame her. She can't hate me any more than I hate myself."

Grimly he planned his next step. Unfinished business must be taken care of, though the bottom fell out of the world.

He obtained the address of the telephone number which he had just called. It was out around Sherman Avenue.

He went out in a taxicab. He wouldn't stop now until he'd got Classon and his hoods.

The number he had was an apartment house, with a switchboard.

"I just talked with two people here," he said. "You must have listened in. He kept calling me Meralt. Who was he, and is he still here?"

"I don't listen in on any phone calls!"

"How much did he give you?"

Her face went fiery red. Classon had paid the girl well for the use, for only a few minutes, of whatever room he had taken. Fid Meralt leaned close to the girl.

"What apartment was it, sister?" he said. "Tell me, damn you, or I'll knock your teeth down your throat!"

"They're gone," she said. "He was carrying the woman. She was drunk, I guess, giggling . . . chewing gum—"

"The apartment number, damn it!"

"Four-O-Seven."

**F**IVE MINUTES later he entered the apartment. There was nothing in it, except the shape of a woman on the huge bed, where her weight had outlined her on the spread. He gulped when he saw that—and the telephone beside the bed. He went over the room carefully. He moved the telephone. There was a piece of paper under it which he'd have missed if he hadn't moved the phone.

He read: *Sorry, Meralt, the trail ends here.*

He knew it did, too. He sat down carefully, so as not to disturb Lela's outline on the spread. He stared at it, probably all he would ever see of her again. He kept thinking: "Classon told her! Classon told her!"

He sat for half an hour, trying to think. His head seemed to be filled with live coals. Finally he shot to his feet. "Classon did tell her," he said to the empty room, almost shouting it. "Yea, he did. He told her what to say to me, probably made her learn the words by heart. But why didn't she call me Ben Pitney? Why didn't she use that odd, hateful name? Why didn't she?"

It might mean little or nothing, for it came to him that while she hadn't called him Pitney, she hadn't called him Fid, either. He felt like a drowning man grasping at a straw. And time after time his eyes returned to the telephone.

Gum! Lela chewing gum, the telephone girl had said. And her voice, to him, had been muffled over the phone.

He grabbed the telephone, found a gray smear in the mouthpiece. Gum, all

right. She'd smeared it there with her tongue as she talked. And under it a tiny piece of paper, half the size of a postage stamp, on which were tiny words: *west tenth*.

"She's working with me," Fid decided. "She was trying to tip me off. And Classon *did* tell her about Ben Pitney—and it didn't matter, or she wouldn't have played ball with me, tried to warn me—tried to tell me to get Classon even if I had to kill her to do it!"

He went downstairs, grinned at the girl at the desk.

"How much is that apartment by the month?"

"A hundred and twenty-five dollars."

"I'm taking it, for a year, on one condition."

"What's that?"

"That the bed isn't made up until I take possession! Here's another century."

"Goodness! Is everybody screwy today? If they are, I hope they stay that way. Two centuries, and a twenty for me! And who'll I say wants the apartment? Managers are queer about little things like that—heh-heh-heh!"

"Fid Meralt."

"Fid—my gawsh!"

Meralt said nothing, walked out of the apartment house, feeling more at peace with himself than he had felt for years. The barrier between him and Lela existed no more. Maybe he was entirely wrong in his deductions; but at least he wouldn't know he was wrong until he saw Lela again. She had put that piece of paper in the mouthpiece of the telephone, and right when she had been telling him she never wanted to see him again.

It was easy, too. Classon wouldn't have guessed. Transmitters caught sounds in the room of the listener. Many people, to shut out such sounds, put their mouths against transmitters, tightly, while they were talking or listening.

"Classon slipped up," thought Fid Meralt, "just as every wise guy does sometime or other."

There still were the pictures that had always been with him—the spinning, staggering fall of Dean Clift, and Dartt

Prague dropping through the trap for Clift's murder.

Those things could never be wished away. If Lela knew, and still cared; but how could she? Dartt Prague had been her brother—and a sister and brother who cared a great deal about each other . . . Well, he'd cared enough about Kathleen Pitney that he had gone to see Dean Clift with a gat in his pocket—and had shot him to death.

There was no gainsaying that. Yet he felt pretty good. That Lela was in deadly danger he knew very well. That was a *fait accompli*, a deed already accomplished, could not be helped now. The thing to do was to get her out of it. And not with cops, either. When coppers surrounded the hideout, and bullets began to fly, Classon would shoot Lela, use her as a shield against the cops, or the bullets of the cops themselves would get her.

HE WISHED he knew how many men Classon had. But it made little difference, at that. If there were a dozen, he was going after them, going to get Lela out safely. That he might be killed doing it did not occur to him. He wouldn't die until she was free.

If, afterward, she never wanted to see him again, that was her own affair. He would have done his job.

He went to West Ninth Street, pressed a button on an apartment house in the middle of the block, slipped inside the stairwell and waited without a sound. If a man was to hide out on West Tenth, he figured, and the man was smart, he would probably pick out this block. And Classon was smart.

"Who's there?" demanded a seductive voice from aloft.

Fid didn't answer.

"Larry!" said the seductive voice again, with silk in it. Fid thought, harkening to her voice, that if Larry were in his place, Larry, too, would keep silent. There was anger in that voice. Then, "The rat! I'm a fool for expecting the two-timing—"

There was the slam of a door. Fid Meralt waited for five minutes. Then he went

up on silent feet, clear to the top of the apartment house. Nobody noticed him, tried to stop him. He reached the roof, made sure it was empty. Autumn chill took care of that. He wriggled through the trapdoor, fastened it on the outside, crawled, flat on his stomach, to the side from which he could look down on West Tenth Street.

He raised himself until he could just peer down on the sidewalk across the street. The address might be right under him, but he'd study the north side of the street first. It was several hours before he got his hoped-for break.

A man hurried along the street. He looked familiar. Fid Meralt spotted him almost at once. He'd seen him, that afternoon. The man had given him a phone number to call, after breaking the ice by asking for a match. Fid remembered the contempt on the man's face as he had walked down the street. He studied the broad back, decided that the fellow's chest was big enough to make a target that nobody could miss.

The man glancing swiftly to the left, ahead, and back over his shoulder, went into an apartment house on the North side of West Tenth—three doors east of the Seventh Avenue Elevated.

Fid Meralt sighed, devoted the next fifteen minutes to escaping from his point of vantage, into West Ninth Street.

It was almost midnight when he re-

turned to his mission. In the meantime he had worked a miracle on himself. A new, checkered suit, a loud tie; reeking perfume, a strange haircut, glassily shining, pointed-toed shoes. Disguises, usually, were silly; but Fid Meralt had worked a miracle. All that remained of the accoutrements of the Fid Meralt of several hours ago, were his two gats.

His hat was the latest thing, and though he hated it, he realized that it was the best part of his disguise. His eyes were savage, determined.

He walked straight to the door of the apartment house which the shadow had entered, and rang the bell. Even his walk and his carriage were different. He rang the bell marked *Janitor*.

A man with faded eyes and stooped shoulders admitted him.

"I want to rent an apartment," said Fid Meralt, hacking the man into his office, shutting the door. "How much, huz-zard," he said in a low voice, "is Classon paying you for tipping him off whenever a stranger comes to the apartment? And is he renting the apartments from you he isn't allowing you to rent to strangers?"

His left hand was at the man's throat. The man's eyes bulged as he stared into the muzzle of one of Fid Meralt's gats. He read murder in Meralt's eyes. In the janitor's eyes, Meralt read that his shots in the dark had come close to the truth—



not that it was remarkable. Classon never overlooked any bets.

Fid Meralt bound and gagged the janitor with his own and the other's belts. Then he snarled into the face of the man with the faded eyes.

"Make a sound of any kind, before I come back, and I'll blow your brains out!"

Meralt locked the man in his small "office," went back into the stairwell. There he paused long enough to remove his shoes and place them side by side in the hall, heels against the stairs leading up.

Then, a gat in each hand, he went up the first flight.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE WHITE SHIELD



**H**E SET HIS FEET on the second flight of steps. He spent half a minute on each step, trying to hear sounds that might guide him to Classon. There were no sounds. Slowly, laboriously, scarcely

breathing, he went on up, his feet wide apart as he paused on each step, waiting for the hail of lead he knew might come, knowing just what he would do when the first coughing speech of gunfire burst forth. If from above, he'd go over the rail and fight it out from below. He'd dropped farther in his time without breaking legs. If it came from below, he would dash to the top of the stairs. If it came from both ways at once . . .

But nothing happened on the second landing. Not, that is, until he had turned left there, in complete silence, and started along the row of doors. That all inside the apartment house was unlighted he had expected. It proved, too, he felt, that this was the right place.

Something round and hard pressed against the small of his back. He had been expecting that. A voice said:

"Just where are you sneaking to, mug?"

The voice spelled death. Its owner fully

expected him to do exactly one thing, drop his gats and elevate his hands. But Fid Meralt never did the obvious thing. He jumped to the right with the speed of a cat, spinning around as he jumped, bringing down the muzzle of his gat. He raked it hard across the skull of the enemy.

The fellow gasped. Fid Meralt had dropped his left gun, and his hand was now over the gat which the enemy held. It wouldn't do for it to speak in this place, for its bellow would be heard all through the house. Fid Meralt yanked forward on the gun-hand of the guard, and smashed down again—and yet again—with his right-hand gat.

The enemy, groaning, sank to the floor. Fid Meralt, thinking of Lela Prague, did not pull his blows. That gat muzzle had bitten into hair, scalp and skull. If the man wasn't dead, he certainly would be unconscious for a long time. Fid Meralt hesitated, almost socked him again for luck.

He decided against it. He stepped back, to see whence the guard had moved to the attack. It was on the landing, where a corner projected from the right-hand wall. Only it did not entirely block off that corner. Just around it, still further to the right, was an inset. A perfect sentry-box for this minion of Herbie Classon.

Fid Meralt dragged his man into that place, propping him up as best he could. He turned his pencil flash on the man's face. Yes, it was the fellow who had asked him for a match, giving him Herbie Classon's message. And he was dead. Blood trickled down his face.

Fid Meralt paused for five minutes, planning his next step. He could yell, and bring men running, dividing Herbie Classon's battlers. He decided against that. They might worm into position to blast away at him from two sides.

Meralt took the dead man's gats, shoved them into his waist. He had twenty-four bullets. That certainly was more than he would have to use.

The next thing, of course, was to find the door behind which Herbie Classon was chucking at the trick he had played on New York's most famous private

dick. And probably telling Lela Prague all about Ben Pitney. Meralt's flesh crawled as he thought of Classon doing that.

And his heart ached as, in fancy, he saw the white face of Lela Prague, listening because she could not escape. Oh, Classon would make a good job of it—as he made a good job of every dirty trick he'd ever pulled.

Fid Meralt put his ears against one panel after another. But it wasn't until he reached the fourth floor that he heard murmurs and laughter beyond a panel. Here, he was sure, was the right door.

But was Lela Prague here? Or was she in some other room, where minions of Classon could spirit her away? Fid Meralt, his eyes bleak, listened for a familiar voice—and heard the unforgettable laughter of Herbie Classon.

Then, a small scream, like that of a mouse caught in a trap. The voice of Lela Prague!

Fid Meralt deliberately went to the railing and fired two shots down the stairwell. Then he screamed, once.

**T**HEN HE went to the head of the stairs and came racing along to the panels through which he had been listening.

"Jeez! I think I've got Fid Meralt! Hurry out here! It's Fid Meralt!"

Meralt's voice was not a perfect imitation of that of the man he had slain below. But through the panels he doubted if anybody could be sure of that. He began to hammer on the door with the heels of his gats.

"I've got Fid Meralt, I tell you! Fid Meralt!"

He stared at the door. He heard a lock being freed, beyond the panels. And the second the door gave inward, ever so slightly, he hit the door with all his weight.

Two men were sent sprawling from the impact of the door, pushed so suddenly inward. As they fell, rolled over, almost instinctively their hands went pawing for their guns.

Meralt himself landed on his face, rolled to his back, and even as he moved,

his gats, both of them, were flaming. And for the first time in ten years he wasn't shooting at legs, arms, or shoulders. He shot with deadly purpose, to kill instantly, before his enemies, outnumbering him so much, could put bullets into him . . .

Or into Lela Prague. A man screamed an oath, yanked Lela Prague from a bed, propped her in front of him, a white shield. His right hand, holding a gat, was thrust between her body and her right arm. Lela was held powerless in the man's left arm. Over her right shoulder Fid Meralt saw a yellowish face, and for the first time he got a look at Herbie Classon.

The room was acrid with burned powder.

Lela Prague cried out: "Shoot him, Fid! Don't let him—"

But he dared not. Classon, feeling secure behind the shield Lela Prague afforded, withheld his fire, and Meralt was able to snap a shot at a head that protruded behind a table. Meralt himself was mostly hidden behind a desk. But in order to get a shot at Classon, he would have to reveal himself.

In the midst of the most flaming hell he had ever experienced, Fid Meralt's mind was at peace. He was fighting for something he worshipped. And he wasn't shooting at legs and arms.

He might save one man out of this mob, to give evidence against members of Classon's organization who weren't here. But even that did not matter just now. Now he had to get Classon. If, right now, Classon could be shot before he was about to pull trigger, Lela Prague would be toppled to the floor. With her legs useless, it might do her irreparable harm.

But it was a chance that had to be taken.

Two men were down in the room, shot. Meralt knew, between the eyes. Two others, at least, caught off guard by Meralt's sudden, savage attack, and frightened by the reputation of the famous detective, had been put out of the conflict. If he got Classon, it would be all over, he knew. Classon, hiding behind Lela Prague. If he missed, hit Lela— And he could not take aim. Once

be got set to shoot, he himself would be a target. He took a deep breath, then quickly moved.

Never had his trigger-finger been surer, his eye keener. He could not afford to miss. It all came in a flash, those thoughts of his, the decision as to what to do.

His gat spoke flatly. He hadn't aimed at Classon's legs, but at that part of his head which looked over the shoulder of Lela Prague. And he saw a black spot there, where his bullet had struck. Classon did not shake, but Lela did. It was rather gruesome, Lela shaking because the body of the man behind her shook like a limb in the wind. And no man, shot through the head, ever pulled trigger on a gat, even a gat with a filed-down sear.

Classon fell, pulling Lela Prague with him. She cried out again, like a mouse caught in a trap, and Fid Meralt thought: "If Classon didn't tell her, he hasn't a chance to do it now!"

Then Fid Meralt got to his feet, hacked against the door and snarled at the last man of Classon's mob who still remained in the conflict.

"Come on! Shoot it out or throw down your gun!"

The man elevated his hands, yelled: "I'll surrender, Meralt! Maybe I can beat the rap!"

Meralt nodded, turned his eyes away, fleetingly, to see if what he figured was right, that this man was the last in this room of Classon's mob who could still fight. The fellow, noting Meralt's movement, changed his mind. His right hand, which still held his gun, came down like the head of a rattler striking. Meralt fired. The report sounded strange now that the room had gone quiet.

The man crumpled.

"You should have dropped your gun if you intended to surrender, huzzard!" snapped Fid Meralt.

**O**UTSIDE sounded the screaming sirens of prowling cars. In the hallways of the apartment house, and on the stairs, stutter guns and gats were hanging. Classon's outside men were fighting off the police. Fid Meralt locked the door,

strode to Lela Prague and lifted her carefully to the bed from which Herbie Classon had snatched her.

"Are you all right? Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes, Fid. The fight's over?"

"My part of it, your part, yes. But, Lela—"

Her eyes were looking deeply into the eyes of Fid Meralt. He tried to read in hers what the verdict was.

"Classon told you?" he whispered.

"Yes. Every killer is a boaster, Fid. He told me the truth—and he told me what you believed."

"I don't understand, Lela. For heaven's sake—"

"He told me that you believed you had killed Dean Clift because he had bungled an operation on your sister, Kathleen, as he had bungled one on me. You'd figured it was all his fault, because he'd been under the influence of liquor. Not obviously drunk, because then the nurses and his assistants would have stopped the operation. But everybody knew he used to hit the bottle hard, and if a simple operation was unsuccessful, it must have been his fault. He was enough under the influence to hangle an operation, but not enough so that his drunkenness was evident."

"That's true. It's what I knew, hut—"

"Classon also said you believed that you might have saved my brother from the scaffold; that you blamed yourself because Dartt had been hanged, when you felt you should have been executed. He said that you ran away and stayed away until Dartt was hanged. You had the motive — and you had actually shot at Clift—"

"And saw him spin, stagger and fall," said Fid Meralt. Again the picture was burning inside his brain. "Saw him fall with his hands over his face. I shot at his head. And I'm better than just a pretty good shot."

"You are now. But were you then? That was a long time ago. Besides, when you're half crazy because you've lost some one you love—"

"What do you mean, Lela?"

"I told you that Classon boasted,

bragged to me, that not even the great and famous Fid Meralt could do anything with him, because he knew all about you, and was using his knowledge to tie your hands. Didn't you ever stop to wonder, Fid, how Classon could know so much?"

"Why, yes, he checked back on me, found out I was Ben Pitney, ten years ago—Ben Pitney, who'd murdered Dean Clift and let Dartt Prague go to the scaffold. But I hid from the world, from newspapers and radio, and didn't know about Dartt until after the—the execution. Too late. Since then—"

"You've been investigated by every wealthy man who used your services, during all this time, by the police before they would work with you, and they never found out that you had been Ben Pitney—"

"Oh, Lela, you mean— But it can't be—"

"Yes, by Classon's own bragging! Dartt was a member of Classon's mob. Dartt wanted to get out of the racket. Dean Clift was surgeon for the mobs. Dean Clift operated on me. I'm mixing it up, I suppose. But, Dartt, when he found out what Clift had done to me, went gunning for him. Classon urged him to! Classon sent some one to make sure—some one who switched guns with Dartt. Dartt didn't kill Clift, though he thought he did, and the bullet that did kill Clift, came from Dartt's gun—"

"But, Lela—"

"You missed, Fid! You missed, you understand? Dean Clift knew that you wouldn't miss a second time. He staggered back, hands over his face, so you wouldn't see that you'd missed. He fell—"

"And then?"

"Then the fellow sent by Classon to frame my brother finished the job, killed Clift. Clift, it seems, had been talking when drunk, and they were afraid he'd spill too much, so they had to get him out of the way. A few second later, Dartt came to finish off Clift—and the coppers had been tipped off, and Dartt—"

"But I didn't kill Clift," murmured Fid Meralt, "and—"

"And, Dartt, my brother, didn't kill him either," said Lela Prague.

THE DOOR burst open. Michaelson came in with coppers at his back. He saw an odd thing: Fid Meralt sitting on the edge of the bed, with Lela Prague in his lap. Michaelson stopped, stared.

"How come, Meralt?" he asked. "Every man in here seems to be dead as a mackerel."

Meralt laughed. His laugh was care-free and joyous.

"Yeah, they escaped the chair, and for the first time I'm not sorry. That's Herbie Classon, over there. Now, Michaelson, it's all yours—except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"You telephone Jacob Weiner and tell him that I did the job he hired me to do, no matter what tomorrow's newspapers may say. Tell him I'll be along to collect my fifty grand—"

Michaelson whistled. "And I only get three hundred a month!"

"And publicity," said Meralt, grinning.

"I can't eat publicity," snarled Michaelson. "I'll call Weiner, though."

"Tell him I'll be with him, at his house, as soon as I have left Miss Prague back in the hospital—"

"Tell him," interrupted Lela Prague, "that we're coming right now, for that money!"

"We?" said Fid Meralt.

"Certainly," said Miss Prague. "I want this to last as long as it possibly can! I've never had so much fun in my life!"

Fid Meralt stared at her in amazement.

"And the shock hasn't hurt you?"

"Good heavens, no, it's done me a world of good! Remember, I've been a shut-in for ten years. And now I've got to go back for six more months—though right now I feel so good that I've a hunch four months or less will do it! And then, Fid—"

"And then, Lela," said Fid Meralt grimly, "I know exactly where we're going for the next eight months. I've leased the place. It's the place where all my troubles began to roll away, and the



hunch came to me, wrapped in a bit of chewing gum, that I might yet get some real happiness out of life. Which reminds me, darling, how did you know about West Tenth?"

"Crooks," said Lela, frowning a little, and looking at him as though he couldn't be expected to know anything about crooks, "are prone to talk too much. Classon, when he took me out to that apartment, told one of his men that he'd be at the place in 'West Tenth' in an hour.

Classon himself furnished the chewing gum, insisted that I chew it for the benefit of the telephone girl. He didn't miss it when we came out—because I kept right on chewing on nothing at all!"

"Yes," said Fid Meral, "crooks always overlook little things."

He didn't realize until he was halfway down the stairs that he himself had overlooked something; he had failed to retrieve his shoes from the hallway of Classon's last hideout.



**In the Next Issue—**



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# Catty Cornered



**By Joe Archibald**

Author of "Caught Shot," "Pin a Lie Murder," etc.

*Scoop Binney thought it was the cats when Abigail's pet tabby was kidnaped and her woman cook faced the hot squat for the gardener's murder. But Scoop changed his mind when Snooty Piper got them both shanghied, trying to prove the cook innocent because he said that — "volts" were not for women.*



**S**NOOTY PIPER does not do anything like a civilized citizen should. He even eats very silly. We are in a School Street beanery one night, and he orders herring and fried eggs for dinner. It is almost a riot he causes, and I says to him will he excuse me a minute as I wish to go next door. Two minutes later, when I come in with a handkerchief tied over my pan, the peroxide-toupeed doll at the cash register yells very loudly: "Ha-a-ah! Pole-e-ee! Robbery!"

"Oh, rest your pipes," I says testily. "I am only trying to shut out a smell." It is some time before I can convince the proprietor of the joint that I am not an unlawful citizen. Then I says to Snooty Piper I wish a hone would get criss-crossed in his windpipe. "That is an awful mess to eat, you crackpot!" I toas at him.

Snooty pays no attention and completes his gastronomic orgy with quite some gusto, and when he eats his pie, he says it tastes awful funny.

"It's the same fork you mauled the fish with, dope," I says. "Did you expect it to taste of persimmons?"

"Bring me a clean fork," Snooty squawks at the dame who juggles the trays. "What kind of a jernt is this, anyhow?"

Snooty and me go down later to the Greek's, where the crackpot drinks six steins of suds without taking a breath. He still smells of Nova Scotia cologne, and a couple of alley cats come into the grog shop and climb all over him.

"You should get air-conditioned, Snooty," I tell him, "or go and buy a nice lavender sachet."

I am still thinking up some more very cutting insults when the phone rings like it meant business. The Greek answers it and yells that it is for either me or Snooty Piper. "Queek, she soun' like she is been the hurry for wanting to see somebody. She oes the ceety's editor for what works for you."

Snooty says, "Answer, Scoop," and I do. It is Dogface Woolsey over at Mr. Guppy's *Evening Star*, and what he says to me is quite startling. I jump right off the floor, half of my noggin going through the top of the phone booth.

I says: "We will hurry to her side right now, Dogface. Oh, that's awful!" I run out and grab Snooty and holler: "Hurry up and grab your skimmer, as what do you think has happened?"

"They've found Judge Crater," the crackpot says, taking a pull at another beaker of hop elixir. "How does he look?"

"It is Ahigail. There has been a murder out at her house. Her — her pet Angora cat has been kidnaped. She is hysterical. Somebody bumped off the booso who was takin' it out for its evenin' constitution. Step on it, Snooty!"

"Ahigail?" he gulps and forgets his thirst. "To horse!"

Now Ahigail Hepplethwaite is a rich old jill who lives out in Back Bay. She could finance three wars in Europe for ten years and still not make a dent in her rock pile. Me and Snooty are quite well acquainted with the old girl and have even joined her at times in a game of rummy.

"That catnip sniffer!" Snooty pants as we dive into a swindle chariot. "She

thought more of it than her right leg. It'll kill her, Scoop! Here is where we fight to the hither end. I will track down the dishonest criminal, if I have to crawl all the way to Little America on my hands and knees."

WHEN we get to Ahigail's tepee, which is all lighted up like the Boston Garden and which is twice as big, we find that Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy is already there looking for clues. Iron Jaw is a detective who has solved as many cases in Beantown as a fish has feathers. One or two big policemen are trying to calm Ahigail, but the old girl is quite furious. She is giving them quite a hashing around with her lorgnette, which weighs almost as much as the stone bench she is sitting on.

"Do something—find something that will lead me to Queen Victoria's abductor!" she wails. "O'Shaughnessy, why are you here? You could not find the tracks of a twenty-ton truck in the snow! Oh, where are those reporters? Where's Piper an'— Oh, there they are!"

"Hello, Ab—er—Miss Hepplethwaite," Snooty says briskly, stepping on Iron Jaw's fingers as the big, talking hex-car moves around on the grass on his hands and knees in search of clues. "We did not tarry. Where's the remains?"

Iron Jaw's howl of pain almost drowns out the answer, but Ahigail hollers lustily: "Over there by the rose arbor! It is my gardener, Olaf Kumquat." The old girl wrings her hands in distress. "Somebody hit him with the top of that hird hath, and I think he is dead. Oh, poor Queen Victoria, where are you, my lambie pie?"

"You think he is dead, hnh?" Snooty queries, while Iron Jaw breathes on his digits. "I never was so sure of anything in my life, even that Iron Jaw is a moron. Olaf is out like the Chicago fire, I am quite convinced. It was quite a hefty taxpayer who massaged him with the masonry. What do you think was the motive?"

"Murder," I says, and Snooty kicks me on the shin.

"Oh, I know," Ahigail cries, "it is ran-

som they want for Queen Victoria. Oh, I'll pay it! Anything up to a million smackers. Life doesn't matter to me without that cat. I will pay it, and don't you dare interfere, any of you policemen. I—"

"There is a citizen who has been rubbed out," Snooty reminds her. "That is very illegal, and you will be aidin' an' abettin' criminal characters if—"

"Yeah," Iron Jaw bellows, "we will not stand by and let a criminal evade punishment just because of an alley cat!"

Bingo! It was Iron Jaw's number, and it seemed to be up. The lorgnette smacked the flatfoot right on the scalp, and I says to the cornerer who just trotted up with his valise: "You can look at either hody first. It does not matter."

"Anybody else want to insult my cat?" Ahigail growls helligerently.

"Nice kitty," I says fast.

The coroner looks at the late Olaf Kumquat, and he states that the gardeners is quite dead.

Iron Jaw begins to move just as the corpse diagnostician feels of his pulse. The big slowfoot scrambles up waving his arms and sounding very energetic. "You bet, men, let's start trackin' them catnipper—kitnappers—nipcaters. We'll leave no tones unturned. We'll— Where am I?"

"Here, Iron Jaw," Snooty says. "It is a murder—remember?"

"Yah," I says. "And it's the cats!"

**A**BIGAIL gets very impatient and threatens to call up the mayor and have everybody fired. I do not blame her very much and ask her a question very quickly.

"Who have you fired lately?"

"Why—er—I had a cook I had to let go," the old girl answers me, loosening up her nerves. "She was almost as big as Iron Jaw, but even dumber. She put meringue on a meat pie and washed the celery with soap flakes."

"She could have nailed Olaf with the chickadee font, easy, huh?" Snooty suggests.

"Why—er—she certainly could!" Ahigail exclaims, and Iron Jaw steps in close.

"I saw her lift the back end of an ice truck one morning to get it off her foot. I'll bet she came back here and stole Queen Victoria! All right, go and arrest her, somebody! She did it to get even. She—"

"It is quite hasty we're getting," Snooty observes. "It is circumstantial evidence. Let us look around a little more first. I am sure that criminals always slip up and leave a clue."

"Piper, I am disappointed in you," Ahigail sniffs. "Iron Jaw, maybe I have misjudged you. That muscle-bound hiscuff burner's name is Henrietta Trilhy, and she lives in East Boston. I've got her house number somewhere. I'll get it for you. You'll find she has stolen Queen Victoria, I'll bet. Oh, Victoria'll die if she doesn't get her liver on time! She is a very delicate cat, and— Poor Olaf! I have been very neglectful of him, haven't I, boys?"

"Well, you have overlooked him a bit," Snooty agrees. "Did Olaf have any relatives?"

Ahigail shook her head. She said that the horticultural citizen had always been very close-mouthed and that his tongue must be as good as new.

"Well, get the hody outta here," Iron Jaw trumpets. "Let's get goin', men. All we got to do is grab that kitchen mechanic an' put her on the griddle. The victim here with the mashed noggin caught her sneakin' outta the joint with the cat, and he got put on ice for keeps with the hird hathtub. Now—er—Miss Hepplethwaite, if you'll give me the address of that Powerful Katinka—"

"It's in the house," says Ahigail, and she starts up the walk. The dead-wagon boys put Olaf Kumquat into a wicker smock, and that is the last we see of him.

I follow Iron Jaw and another very large gendarme up to the house, where Ahigail has already handed over the address of Henrietta's ménage. Suddenly I miss Snooty Piper, and so does Ahigail.

"Where is that halfwit?" the old doll asks. "If he is walkin' in my panny bed, he'll never sleep in his again. Pi-4-4-ip-er!"

"Well, good-night everybody." Iron

Jaw thunders. "I will have Henrietta all trussed up for the braising boudoir when I see you again."

"Volts for women, huh?" I says.

Nobody laughs, as somebody is coming in singing. It is Snooty Piper, sounding like a mighty pipe organ, as he hollers: "Ma-a-a-any-hr-r-r-ave hear-r-rt's are aale-e-up in the dee-e-e-up, so be-e-war-r-re, be-e-e-awa-r-r-re! O-h-h-h, the bell e-e-eyun the-e o-o-old t-ower i-i-i-ings, Oh sa-a-a-il-or be-war-r-re!"

"Snooty Piper," Abigail yips, "if you've been in my wine cellar, I'll—"

"Oh, I was eatin' fish earlier this evening, and I feel very salty, ha, ha," Snooty chirps. "How are you, Scoop?"

"I'll send the wagon hack for him, Miss Hepplethwaite," Iron Jaw promises. "Just humor him a little."

**T**EN MINUTES after Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy has pulled out of the estate, Snooty says he is quite sure that Henrietta has not stolen the long-haired feline and that everybody has been acting quite hastily about it all.

"We should look into Olaf Kumquat's room over the garage and see what kind of a past the taxpayer had," Snooty declares.

"Go ahead," Abigail says. "My feet hurt. I am sure Queen Victoria will be back in her basket before midnight. It should look quite simple even to you, Piper. I fired the cook. The cook got harned up worse than her cakes. The cook came back. She stole the cat."

"Did Henrietta knit?" Snooty asks.

"Huh? Why, yes, she did," Abigail answers. "So what, Watson? Ha, ha, you find a needle?"

"It looks like I can expect no co-operation here, Scoop," the green-suited crackpot sniffs. "I will leave. Come on."

"And don't cross that flower bed, Piper!" the old girl hollers.

"Oh, go drop a stitch!" Snooty snorts, and Abigail sickens a great Dane on us. We heat it to a taxi two blocks away by the length of the Dane's whiskers.

"Now she is mad at us," I says to him. "You would atah Santy Claus, you nit-wit."

"The old girl's slipping," the numbskull declares. "She believes that Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy is right."

"I am bettin' on Abigail," I says. "I suppose you picked up a footmark in the grass, huh? What were you doin' out there while—"

Snooty ignores me and tells the driver of the hack to go down to headquarters. When we walk in we find that Henrietta Trilby is already quite securely in the hands of the law. After one look at the kitchen dunkey, I am sure she could have murdered Olaf Kumquat with a corner of Fenway Park just as easy as with the bird bath. Henrietta is built like a concrete mixer, and a blacksmith could very easily bend horseshoes into shape over her lower jaw. The amazon keeps trying to land a fist on Iron Jaw's chin every time he sticks it out to ask a question.

"Come clean, Henrietta," the big flat-foot bellows, keeping up his footwork. "Look at the white hairs on your coat. They are from the tabby cat. You are guilty of rubbing out Olaf Kumquat. You crooked him with the b—"

"Ya're a liar, ya big hogshead," the cook says. "Them white hairs was offen a furpiece I had stole from me in a movie joint. I'm innocent, an' if I ever git outta this can, I'll sink my fist into ya so far they'll have to operate t'git it out! Ha-a-ah, I caught ya a pretty one that time!"

Iron Jaw reels around, feeling his hingle, and when it comes away, it looks like a stop-light. Me and Snooty have to laugh, and the gendarmes throw us out into LeGrange Street.

"Well," I says as we head for the Greek's, "you saw them white hairs on her coat. That tags her. Boy, is she dumb not thinkin' to brush herself off? I will 'phone Dogface all I know."

"That will take but a second or two," the fresh yap says. "You are just as dumb as Iron Jaw an' Abigail. I will show the commonwealth that they are persecuting a defenseless woman."

"If she is," I snort, "a saber-toothed tiger is a pushover for a mouse."

"Oh-b-h as-a-sailor be-war-r-re. Sailor be-war-r-re—"

"Listen," I says, very solemn, "I can stand just so much, Snooty Piper. Look, everybody is watchin' you—and that cop is gettin' ready to— Hurry up and let's get to the Greek's."

**S**NOOTY PIPER takes something from his pocket at a table in the Greek's, and it is a long piece of steel with some yarn sticking to it. "I found it in the rose bower," he says. "It is Exhibit A."

"You take it right down to headquarters," I says, "you crook! You are stoppin' the wheels of justice, an' it proves that Henrietta Trilby assassinated Olaf, the plant nurse. Snooty, you hear me?"

"How could I help it even if I was deaf?" he retorts. "Don't you notice anything unusual when I show it to you up close? Concentrate, Scoop."

"It is still a knittin' needle, and a big one," I says. "If that female Carnera weighed another pound, she would make dollies with crowbars. That will land her right on the toasting sofa."

Snooty shakes his noggin quite wearily. "You will never be a criminologist, Scoop. Still, how could you think like a citizen who eats a lot of fish like me. Ha, ha!"

"I shudder when I think what you would be like if you never ate any fish," I counter. "Well, let's go and pick up a morning journal and read the news."

"If you was a subway guard," Snooty says, "you would spend your two weeks' vacation in a coal mine. But maybe we should read and improve our minds, huh?"

The early edition of the Beantown morning rag only tells us what we already know. Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy promises the public that he will have Henrietta's confession on the records before the next lunch hour before the work-day world heaves into sight. The paper says that Ahigall Hepplethwaite is quite ready to forgive Henrietta if she will only take down her hair and own up where she caged the feline. But Henrietta is quoted as saying that she does not have any idea where the liver destroyer is, and what is more, does not give a boot in Hades. The morning rag says that

the prisoner has assaulted one Aloysius O'Shaughnessy, among other things.

"I would imagine that if Henrietta ever proved her innocence," Snooty remarks as we evacuate the beer joint, "Iron Jaw would purchase a one-way ticket to Tahiti, don't you think?"

"I wish to forget the whole thing," I says. "Let the law take its course, as Henrietta Trilby is a very dangerous citizen."

The next morning, Ahigall comes to the Star office waving a letter around her skimmer. She yells for Mr. Guppy, but he is not present. Dogface Woolsey has to do.

"They have written me," she says. "That woman's confederates want fifty thousand dollars before they'll give back Queen Victoria. We can't let the police know. Er—hello, boys!"

"Mornin'," I says, but Snooty snubs her.

"I want somebody to go to where they tell me to put the money with me," the old doll says, getting her grammar quite scrambled, "so they won't dare to grab me, too. Huh, this is to be kept quiet, as I am willing to pay. What is fifty thousand dollars?"

Snooty snaps his fingers. "I would not even stoop to pick up such a pittance. You are a sucker, Miss Hepplethwaite! You are encouraging crime and should be ashamed of yourself. You will let the unlawful element go free to snatch other things. Maybe somebody's mother will lose her little child. It is appalling, to say the least. I will tell the public if you—I will call the police, for I will not stand aside and—"

Ahigall picks up Dogface Woolsey's bottle of ink and throws it at Snooty, but it goes right through a brand-new pane of glass in the door that has OSWALD GUPPY, PRESIDENT, on it in gold letters.

"Come on, Scoop!" Snooty yells. "I am going to find Olaf's murderer before the state's chef roasts Henrietta. Well, anyway she is a cook and can tell them when they have her well done!"

I only follow Snooty because Ahigall tries to hit me with a paste jar. I get

into a taxi with him and almost swallow my bridgework when he tells the handit driving the cab to go to Back Bay.

"We got to get there before Abigail gets home," the crackpot says. "I must look into Olaf's shanty."

"That will be breaking and entering," I tell him. "Don't you ever get scared of anything?"

"Only school teachers," he retorts. "Is this as fast as you can go, driver?"

"Go much slower and I will pay you double," I says.

"Drive faster!" Snooty snaps.

"Say, I ain't no Siamese twins," the swindle-bus jockey snaps. "Make up your minds."

I refuse to follow Snooty into Abigail's grounds when we get to her place. "I'll sit right here," I says. "I have met that great Dane, and he don't purr. Ha, ha, I will be prayin' for you!"

**T**HE CRACKPOT could crawl into a sewer and come out with a bouquet of orchids. In about fifteen minutes he comes over the hedge, and he is grinning like he won the Irish Sweepstakes.

"A big guy tried to stop me," he says, "But I showed him my G-man's badge and he gave me three dames to call up and held the pooch while I looked into the place where Kumquat used to live. Come, come. Oh-h-h lou-oudly the hell e-eyun the-e o-o-old to-ow-wei ri-f-ings. Sa-a-ailor, ta-a-ake care. Sa-a-ailor be-wa-rr-re!"

"Where ya wanna go?" the back driver snarls. "I ain't physle!"

"Sailors Snug Harbor. Take us to India Wharf. Maybe I'll sign up for a hitch around the Horn. Stow ya gab, matey, or I'll keel haul ya! Thar-r-r she blows!"

"Ah—er—s'long, Snooty," I says hastily. "Driver, stop this cab and then keep on goin' to Danvers. I been expectin' this for weeks. He is violent an'—"

"Huh? A nut? Er—ya mean—" The citizen stops the cab very suddenly, and when I pick myself out from under the dash, he is gone.

"Let him go," Snooty says serenely. "His picture and address are here. We will give him back the boiler after we are

through with it. Quite skittish, ain't he?"

"Listen here," I says, "what is your name? What day is this? Who is president? Where was you born?"

"Don't be silly, Scoop," the crackpot says and gets into the driver's seat. Before I have my marbles all back, we are getting out of the cab near India Wharf and walking into a butcher shop.

The citizen at the block bangs the leg of a cow in half with one lusty wallop and then roars: "What'll it be?"

"How's your liver?" Snooty asks him.

"Don't git fresh, or I'll rip that green burlap from top to bottom an' it'll fall right away from you!" the meat carver bays, eying Snooty's bright-green suit.

Snooty flashes that badge. I try to reach for a cleaver, but he pushes me out of the way and asks: "Have you sold much liver lately, sir? I am of the F.B.I. and demand some respect. Any guys come in and buy liver? Beef liver from a cow?"

"You couldn't git it out of no turkey," the butcher counters. "Er—say, dat's right—I was tryin' t'figger it out. Mostly it's skirts what comes in an' buys the meat, but this time it was a big swab what walked like a duck. He bought all I had."

"Describe him!" Snooty demands, like he had authority.

"Aw, he had an ugly mug wit' a heezer that looked like it lost in a argyment wit' a pile driver," the butcher says. "The guy had a big gold tooth, an' his ears was as big as flapjacks. I t'ink he was a sailor from one of them scows out there. They come in here this time of year wit' salt mackerel. I says, what ya want wit' all that liver? An' he says: 'What ya t'ink, nosey? A gny's gotta have a spare, just in case.' An then he gives me the laugh."

"I suppose he killed Olaf Kumquat, huh?" I sneer. "I s'pose a tough citizen like that one that bought liver, crochets? What if he did buy liver? It's been hein' et."

"What terrible language you use," Snooty chides me. "Let's go down and look at the ships, Scoop. The sea is in my blood at times. O-h-h-h, sa-a-ailor, be-war-r-r-e! Sailor, ta-a-ake car-r-r-e—"

"Ha, ha," I says. "Okay, Snooty, it is all right. I understand. Jus' take it easy, as Scoop Binney understands you!"

"You think I'm nutty, huh?" he bristles. "I'll show you."

The crackpot goes down to the dock, and I don't have no more sense than to follow. There is a schooner tied up, and big white letters on the stern tell the world that she is "*Betsy Boop*." A bosco is hanging over the rail, looking at us, and he does not look like Freddy Bartholomew.

"Ahoy!" Snooty hollers as he climbs aboard the packet, which does not smell like it carried coffee. "Where ye bound?"

"Huh!" the very tough tar grunts. He is wearing a big sweater, which looks home made, and Snooty says in a whisper to me: "I bet you think a citizen with that awful mug would have a dame to knit for him, huh?"

"Where's the skipper?" he asks out loud. "Maybe I'll sign on."

"Ha-a-a-h!" laughs the big tar. "You panty waists couldn't outfight a smelt much less a mackerel. Don't make me laff, 'cause me lips is cracked. If ya want the skipper, he's down in his cabin."

**T**HERE does not seem to be a crowd of seagoing citizens on the tuh, and Snooty explains that they go ashore and get scalded to the ears after being out on the fishing banks for months.

"What's the idea?" I whisper at him as he goes down a ladder. "You think Henrietta's confederates are here, huh? Maybe they will fool you and show cards that say they are in the Union Army. Ha, ha!"

"Shut up," Snooty breathes back at me. "Don't look now, but I think the very tough citizen on deck is folleerin' ua down." He takes something from his pockets and drops it when we get down into where the crew of the "*Betsy Boop*" gets in out of the weather. It is the knitting needle with the yarn around it. I open my mouth, but Snooty closes it. "Shh-b-h! I am fishin'," he says.

Just then I hear something. It says, "Me-e-o-ow!"

"What was that?" I gulp.

"A dog, Scoop," Snooty snorts. "What did you think? We're getting warm."

"I am afraid we will be as cold as a cod on ice in very short order," I quaver, "if we don't get out of here."

"Avast there, ya swabs!"

It is not a very musical voice that turns us around as if we are on casters. A big bosco is standing in a doorway. If he leaned against the Statue of Liberty, France would have to send us another one.

"Uh—er—look at the nose an' his ears," Snooty gulps. "Er—we are lookin' for the skipper of this tuh. We would like to go fishin'. Are you the captain?"

"Yeah," the massive mariner blows. "I'm him! Skullhuster Boody, that's me! Who wants ta know?"

"Why—er—" I begin. "Snooty, tell him."

It is just then that the big bosco from up on deck comes down and hands Boody something. "I foun' it, skipper," he says. "Dat knittin' needle ya lost. Right at the foot of the ladder."

I am almost ready to faint when the rough sea citizen says: "Huh, I been lookin' all over for it. I wouldn't never git them mittens done without it. T'anks, Keelhaul."

"You knit, huh?" Snooty laughs. "Ha, ha! I'll never be surprised at anythin' any more, even if I see Iron Jaw O'Shaughneasy hemstitchin' lace curtains."

"Iron Jaw—who?" Skullhuster trumpets, his glimmers getting very mean-looking. "Ain't he a dete—"

"Ah—er—I got to git some air, Snooty," I says. "I will see you upstairs."

Snooty is taking a gander at a yellowed sheet of paper he has in his hand. Before I can stop the crackpot, he says: "Boody, once you sailed on the *Minnis Ha Ha*, didn't you?"

Skullhuster looks at the other salty bosco, and I can see he almost swallows his chew.

"What if I did?" he growls at Snooty and almost blows off his green hat.

"There was a taxpayer on the same boat by the name of Olaf Kumquat. He was the skipper. I s'pose you know Olaf



is already as cold as a stepmother's kiss down in Davey Jones' tepee, huh? It seems that Olaf was taking a very long-haired, white tabby cat for a trot around a garden and a very dishonest character hit him with a birdie's bath and stole the liver punisher. Own up, Boody. Where is the feline? That is the knitting needle I found near the scene of the crime!"

"Run, Snooty!" I holler, and I have quite a good start. I do not reach the ladder, because something smacks me on the coco, and it is not a truffle. I go head first into the tub's galley, and I can hear Skullbuster's swearing as he goes about killing Snooty Piper. I see a tea kettle on a stove when I get my marbles back and it is steaming.

Just as the tough tar who has smacked me comes in to deliver the *coup de grce*, I pour the hot water right on his tootsies, and he tries to pick up both Great Danes at the same time. He howls very earnestly. I hit him with a soup kettle and then go out to help Snooty. He needs assistance very badly, as Skullbuster Boody has got him down and has his neck in both hands.

There is quite some slack at the back of Boody's pantaloons, and I pour the contents of the teakettle right into it. You never heard even an Indian on the warpath make more of a fuss. Skullbuster lets go of Snooty and rolls all over the deck. Then I hit him over the scalp with the empty kettle.

Snooty Piper's face is quite blue, like fountain pen ink, and I am sure Skullbuster took two half hitches in his windpipe, for it is almost three minutes before the crackpot can talk.

"Th-thanks, Scoop," he gasps. "How did you do it?"

"Shut up," I tosses back at him. "Let's get the cat and vamoos. Oh, you can get me into the worst—"

**W**E go into Skullbuster's cabin, and there is Queen Victoria sitting quite cramped up in a parrot's cage. She is very indignant and even makes a pass at Snooty when he springs her. I jump for a very ugly-looking roseoe that Boody has right next to his bunk, and it is a

very smart move because the two tough boys are ready to get quite nasty again. They come in waving fish knives around their noggins and tell us they will insert them right into our gills.

"Oh ye-e-eah!" I says, pointing the cannon at the rough tars. "M-make a sh-sh-shoot an' I'll m-m-move. P-put up y-y-your hb-h-rains or I w-w-will blow y-your h-hands out. H-hurry, Snooty! Up the stairs and h-holler for help!"

*Bang!* It is very nervous I am, and I do not mean to shoot. The slug goes right through the top of Snooty's hat and kicks a knife out of Skullbuster's hand.

"Did you f-forget I was with you?" Snooty hollers.

"Go and yell for help," I says. "We are not in the Y.M.C.A., you halfwit!"

Snooty Piper gets by the rough mariners and is carrying Queen Victoria by the collar like she is a valise. In a minute or so I hear Snooty hollering, and I am sure even the Northwest Mounted heard him. In a very few minutes we have three big policemen and some water-front taxpayers down in the "*Betsy Scoop*," and they have at the pair of dishonest characters and truss them up.

"This is the Hepplethwaite cat!" Snooty yells. "Skullbuster Boody here is the assassin of Olaf Kumquat. He dropped a knittin' needle, the sissy! It'll send him to the toasting salon at Charleston. Hello, Scoop. I am quite pleased with you."

"Wait until my nerves get unwound," I says.

It is not long before we are up at Le-Grange Street and have the rough boys in the cooler. Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy won't believe us, so Snooty says:

"Listen, when I picked up the knittin' needle with the yarn stickin' to it, I smelled fish. It is like a steel fork you have been eatin' fish with, as the smell sticks to it. I says to myself the assassin is a character who is around fish a lot. I knew that the Popeyes who sailed the hriny did a lot of knitting. Ask anybody. So after they arrested Henrietta for havin' white hairs on her coat, I went and looked into the deceased's affairs and found that he used to be a seagoing tax-

payer and was once skipper on the 'Mén-  
sée Ha Ha.' I found a list of his crew,  
and one was named Boody.

"So I went to a butcher shop near the  
docks and found out a criminal character  
had bought out every smack dab of beef  
liver. Then I says I am on the right trail.  
I says to myself that the bosco who  
rubbed out Kumquat found out that his  
old skipper was a landlubber and was  
working for a rich old doll. So I figured  
that the assassin went to see Kumquat  
to get him to tap Abigail's safe. But Olaf  
was indignant and told the tar to scram.  
Skullbuster figured that any old dame  
thinks more of her tabby cat than any-  
thing, so he snatched the liver guzzler  
and held it for ransom. Olaf tried to dis-  
suade Boody, but got tapped with the  
sparrow basin for his trouble."

"Guessin' again, huh?" Iron Jaw  
means. "I—er— You let me have a half  
hour start before you let that cook loose!  
I've got a right to protection. I—"

"It wasn't all guessing," Snooty  
argued. "That knitting needle was big  
enough to pry open a strongbox. And I  
am a connoisseur of fish. Just give me  
any knife that has been messing with  
fish and I will name what brain food it  
was by the smell. Boody, as you are all  
quite aware right now, reeks of the finned  
denizens that he chases. I wish you would  
open a window here."

Iron Jaw goes out very scared and al-  
most bowls over Abigail Hepplethwaite,  
who rushes in to get her arms around  
Queen Victoria.

"Oh, Piper," she squeals, "name your  
reward! I hope you'll forgive me. Name  
anything!"

I feel very happy as I am quite sure  
me and Snooty Piper will be taking at  
least a cruise on the Mediterranean very  
shortly. I says to myself, Snooty will at  
least ask for ten thousand.

"Ah—er—" he stammers, "Why—that  
new maid yon've got, the one with the big  
dark lamps and that ooo—la-lal! If you  
would put in a good word for me—fix  
it so I can take her out—"

"If she don't go out with yon, Piper,"  
Abigail says, "she is fired!"

Everybody makes a grab at me be-  
cause, by now, I have got a cop's roseoe  
in my hand and am ready to slay Snooty.  
Two big policemen drag me into a cell  
and lock me up.

"It has been quite an ordeal he has  
been through," I hear the crackpot tell  
everybody. "It has unnerved him. Let  
him out when you think he is all right."

Right now I am hiding around the cor-  
ner from where Snooty Piper rooms. He  
always gets home about one in the A. M.  
I will leave no clues, as I have already  
dug a hole to put the iron pipe in.



# A Sucker a Day

By Convict 12627

Author of "By Their Own Hands," etc.

*Slick Martin was a knife hustler by trade. And he could extract fifty bucks from a victim without letting a drop of blood.*



A FISHERMAN could catch no fish without bait to hide the hook, nor could a confidence man land his sucker without bait. In some instances the confidence man proceeds upon

the theory that the sucker has a little larcency in his makeup, and at other times he uses his victim's vanity as an aid in separating him from his money.

The confidence man—the real confidence man—enjoys an enviable reputation in the underworld and is generally looked up to by men and women engaged in minor rackets requiring less mental ability and productive of smaller profits. But the "short con" men as an equal, for they are known chisellers and resort to any racket which might yield them any sum from five dollars upward.

One popular short-con racket is known as the trick-knife game. This racket has been widely publicized, but it has so many variations that many persons who have read of others being victimized often become victims themselves. This racket is not confined to rural districts; in fact, most of the "knife hustlers" operate in the larger cities. Their "take" is not large, but they believe in a new variation of an old adage to the effect that: "A sucker a day keeps the wolf away." Let us follow "Slick" Martin, knife hustler, as he goes about his day's work . . .

When Martin seated himself in a chair

in a hotel lobby, he had chosen his seat with care. The man occupying the chair next to him, he had learned, was a visiting contractor from a small town upstate. He had not yet ascertained the size of the other's bank roll, but he was pretty well convinced that it contained at least fifty dollars, and this was about the maximum amount this particular racket would yield.

"Nice weather we're having," Slick commented to the man in the other seat.

"Indeed it is," the out-of-town man replied. "Looks like an early spring."

"Yes," Slick agreed, "I've noticed in the past few days that there is considerable new building going on in the city."

"Is that so?" the other asked. "That's my line; that is, I'm a building contractor. Barber's the name."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Barber," returned Slick, extending his hand. "My name's Martin. Hardware's my line. Are you acquainted in the city?"

"Not too well," answered Barber. "I get in here a couple times a year, but as a rule I don't get out of the business district."

"I'm pretty well acquainted all over the city," Slick said. "If you have nothing important to do perhaps you'd like to take a walk about the city. I'd be glad to show you some of the new building being done."

The visiting contractor assented, and fifteen or twenty minutes later the two men were walking down a street on the edge of the business district. They paused in front of a lot where excavating had

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been started. But apparently no work was being done that day, as only one man was there. He was gray-mustached and wore striped overalls. He was writing on a small pad when the two men stopped.

**S**LICK was explaining to his companion about the building to be erected there, and in gesturing, his hand struck the overalled man's elbow. The latter turned and regarded Slick over his steel-rimmed glasses.

"Doggone it," he said reproachfully, "you made me break my pencil."

"Sorry, Dad," Slick apologized. "I'll lend you my knife."

As he thrust a hand into his pocket and brought forth a knife, he winked at his companion. He handed it to the old man.

"There you are, Dad," he said. "Sharp—on her up."

The old man tugged at the knife blade, but it failed to open.

"Doggone it," he said, "I can't open the blasted thing."

"Let me have it," Slick said, extending his hand. "It's very simple," he said, when the other had handed him the knife. "See there?"

He opened the knife without any effort, closed it and gave it back to the old man. The latter again failed to open it.

"Let me have it again," Slick said, apparently a little exasperated. "Now watch me open it. See? I hold it between the thumb and forefinger of my left hand, then raise the blade with the right hand. Just like this."

He opened it and again handed it to the old man.

"Now," he asked, "do you think you can open it?"

"I've never seen anything yet I couldn't do," the old man said testily, "once I've seen how it's done."

"Well, then," Slick offered, "I'll bet you a cigar you can't open that knife in two minutes."

The old man looked at Slick, then at the knife.

"Mister," he said, "I ain't what you'd call a gambling man, but I'll just take you up on that. I'll bet you a cigar I can

open that knife in two minutes. A nickel cigar," he added.

"Okay," Slick smiled, pulling out his watch, "go ahead."

The old man pulled and tugged at the knife blade, but it refused to budge. He placed the knife between his knees and pulled, but he had no success.

"Time's up," Slick called. "In fact, I gave you ten seconds over two minutes."

The old man relinquished the knife.

"First knife I ever see that I couldn't open," he said. "You wait right here, and I'll go across the street and buy you a cigar—a nickel one."

"Oh, let it go, Dad," Slick said.

"Nostree," the old man returned. "When I lose, I pay."

He walked across the street and entered a cigar store. Slick turned to his companion.

"I guess losing that nickel cigar just about broke his heart," he laughed. "And I don't suppose he has tumbled yet that it's a trick knife. Did you see how I opened it?"

"Not exactly," Barber answered.

"Here," Slick explained, holding the knife in his hand. "You see that little round piece of nickel on the end of the knife. It looks like a rivet, but you have to push on it or you can't open the knife. Try it."

The contractor accepted the knife and opened it without difficulty.

"Pretty clever," he said, returning it.

"When the old fellow comes back," Slick suggested, "you try to get him to bet you that you can't open it. Maybe you can win one of his nickel cigars."

The contractor chuckled. "I'll try it," he promised.

The old man returned and extended a cigar to Slick.

"There you are, mister," he said, "the best five-cent cigar in town. Now, would you mind letting me see that knife again?"

"Not at all," Slick replied, handing him the knife.

**T**HE OLD MAN pulled gingerly at the blade, then turned the knife over and over in his hand carefully, wonderingly.

"That sure is very peculiar," he said.

"You don't catch on very quick, do you, Dad?" the contractor asked.

The old man raised his head quickly.

"I suppose you think you can open it," he said.

"Why, yes," the contractor returned, "I believe I can."

"For how much?" the old man depended.

The contractor's eyes twinkled.

"Well," he said, "for a good nickel cigar, anyway."

"If you're so much smarter than I am," the old man snapped, "why don't you bet something?"

He closed his fist on the knife and struck the palm of his other hand.

"By golly," he exclaimed, "I'll bet you fifty dollars you can't open that knife in two minutes."

The contractor hesitated, but Slick nudged him with an elbow.

"I'll just take you up on that," the contractor said.

The old man handed the knife to Slick and pulled out a worn billfold. He extracted two twenty-dollar bills and a ten and started to give them to Slick as stakeholder, but he pulled his hand back.

"Say," he said, "did you show this fellow how to open this knife?"

"He hasn't seen any more than you have," Slick assured him. "You saw me open it at the same time he did."

"All right, then," the old man said, passing the money to Slick. "You hold stakes, and if he don't open the knife in two minutes I win. Is that right?"

The contractor nodded and placed fifty dollars in Slick's hand. The old man pulled out an old-fashioned watch, and at his command, the contractor began tugging at the blade. His fingers pressed on the little nickel button until his knuckles were white, but the blade did not yield. He glanced helplessly at Slick, but the latter had his eyes on his watch, appar-

ently checking the time with the old man.

"Time's up!" the old man shouted gleefully. "I even gave you a few seconds over." He turned to Slick, "I'll take the money, mister," he said, "and I hope you enjoy that cigar."

Slick handed him the money without a word, and the old man walked away chuckling to himself. Apparently he was no longer interested in sharpening his pencil or in the notes he had apparently been making when the two men first appeared on the scene. The contractor was still fumbling with the knife.

"Give me that," Slick snapped, snatching the knife from the other's hands. "Why didn't you do as I told you?" he demanded, knocking the knife against the palm of his hand. "Instead of doing this?" He imitated the other's futile efforts. "You were yanking and pulling on that blade," he went on, "like it was hard to open. All you had to do was press gently on this little button and pull the blade open. Now do it."

The contractor followed instructions and the knife opened easily. He handed it back to Slick.

"I guess I don't catch on very quick," he said.

Slick dropped the knife in a pocket.

"Well," he said, "I guess that's one time a working man got the best of a contractor, and fifty dollars will buy a lot of nickel cigars."

That night Slick Martin and the old man, who was no longer overalled, were talking in the latter's room.

"Doggone if I wasn't afraid," the old man chuckled, "the way that fellow was manhandling that knife, that he would dislodge the 'gimmick'."

"Not a chance," Slick smiled. "When you once knock that knife on your hand, and that little shot slips behind the spring, it'll take another sharp blow to release it. Oh, well," he yawned, "a sucker a day keeps the wolf away."



# Five Cents a Life

*By Maitland Scott*

Author of "Last-Mile Bargain," etc.

*A man's life is worth what he can get for it. Tight-spot Andrews figured his was worth at least a nickel.*



**J**OHNS "TIGHT-SPOT" ANDREWS of *The Daily Dial* wandered aimlessly into the Red Parrot, second-rate night club, and sat down at an inconspicuous table in the rear. The Red Parrot's owner, Ernie Trauber, darted a narrowed gaze at the tall form of the lanky reporter. Trouble, serious trouble, too often happened where Andrews turned up. For more than one reason the big, florid-faced Trauber wondered if the newshawk's aimless attitude might not be only pretence.

Gracie, the cigarette girl, started off toward Andrews' table the minute she spotted him, a bright, glad smile on her

crimson lips—there was something in the young-old eyes of the newspaper man that attracted women. Trauber watched narrowly, saw her nod as the newshawk held up three fingers, questioning. The night-club owner's heavy jowls tightened, and a deep, slow flush of anger crept up his thick neck.

That was it, he concluded. Sure, Gracie had been near when he'd told the doorman to signal him the minute any of Mike Malone's hoods showed up. She'd tipped off the news monkey that three of them were coming. Well, Mike had said that his cannons were making only a nice, friendly visit.

But big Ernie Trauber was worried. Suppose Mike, growing racket boss, had changed his mind since he'd argued him out of making the Red Parrot pay tribute? He and Mike had been pals in the old days, but Mike's night-club protection racket had grown—and Mike Malone, the big boss, was getting greedier by the day. . . . Anyhow, that smart dame Gracie had no business blowing off to Andrews. It might all mean nothing, but he didn't like to have the had-luck scribbler around on a night like this. And did Mike have to send three hoods?

Across the smoky club Trauber's gaze met the reporter's, and the latter saw that his three-finger questioning had been observed.

Gracie circulated among the tables, silken tights gleaming against the soft curves of her nimble legs. Trauber went to his small office on the main floor, there to have her sent to him. He'd teach that dame a thing or two. . . .

Ernie Trauber rang for one of his floormen, told him to send Gracie in. But Gracie didn't come. Instead, the floorman returned with a note from "Tight-spot" Andrews. Trauber cursed and dug into his desk for a special bottle when he read the newshawk's three-word note:

*I wouldn't, Trauber.*

*Andrews*

A couple of years ago Ernie Trauber had beaten up a check-room girl. She had

been afraid to bring charges for fear Trauber would see to it that she got plenty from a hired strong-arm thug or two. Ernie Trauber did things that way.

**TIGHT-SPOT ANDREWS** lolled boredly at his table, apparently too lazy to even touch his highball. Andrews was worth his weight in gold to his paper. It was good for circulation to have a star reporter who often figured more in sensational headlines than did the police themselves.

The newshawk had made an extensive and detailed study of every known criminal that he could in his five years of reporting since he'd left college. He claimed that complete knowledge of their personal lives was invaluable, but it seemed miraculous to even his city editor how he managed to be on the scene of so many shootings. And nearly always Andrews got into a spot from which it seemed humanly impossible to escape; hence the nickname.

Tonight, however, Tight-spot Andrews was unarmed. In the recent cleanup of a desperate narcotic ring, too many narcotic peddlers had been found dead—with bullets from Andrews' pistol in them. His license had been recalled by a cantankerous official, who maintained that the newshawk was gaining a killer's reputation and that legitimate killing should be left entirely to the police.

Andrews had recently dropped in at Malone's "front," a medium-sized ice plant, and chatted with the racketeer on whom the police were aching to pin a heavy rap. Andrews wasn't sure, but he thought—from Malone's growing pretentiousness—that he was about ready to spread his reign of tribute-collections, even as far as his old pal Ernie Trauber.

Andrews figured that Trauber might be stubborn, relying on his past friendship with Malone to get out of paying tribute money. There might, just possibly might, be something hot doing—if Malone decided to hump off Trauber as an example to other night-club owners. Such things had been done before. And Andrews wanted proof for his paper. He wished that tonight he were armed. He

shrugged finally. It had always been his boasted theory that no matter how tight a spot a man got into, there was always some possible way he could think himself out of it. . . .

Joe Sauchelli was the first of Mike Malone's henchmen to enter the nearly empty Red Parrot, and Andrews drew back a bit into the semi-shelter of his booth-table. It might not do to be seen. If something really were to come off to-night, Malone's outfit wouldn't want a witness running around loose. The few remaining patrons of the early morning didn't matter: half tipsy and unobserving, and obviously not of the type to recognize underworld characters.

But John Andrews of the *Dial* knew the Malone outfit, and the Malone outfit knew him.

Tight-spot Andrews watched Joe Sauchelli, saw the racket thug wander slowly by Ernie Trauber. The two spoke briefly, and then Sauchelli seated himself at a table near a center part of the small dance floor. Andrews studied the man's face and then drew back farther into his booth and reviewed the main characteristic of Sauchelli—thirst for vengeance.

A year ago Sauchelli's brother, Luigi, had been found murdered in his apartment. Joe had been trying to find his killer with all the intentness of an emotional Latin nature. Joe had never been either pleasant or unpleasant, but since his brother had been murdered—with some heavy blunt object, and no clue of the killer found—his lean, olive-complexioned face had become a dull, saturnine mask from which vicious little eyes gleamed, questioning, ever searchingly. He was a small man, physically, but stocky and tough.

A few more customers reeled out of the Red Parrot, homeward bound, and then Tony De Carlo came in. A big, lumbering man with heavy features, he repeated the wandering perambulations of Sauchelli, ending up at the table with his racketeer pal.

Andrews could see that Ernie Trauber was becoming perceptibly nervous.

In fact, Trauber wondered for a mo-

ment or two if he should not have hired a few hoods for the night, just in case. But he quickly reasoned that he could argue Mike Malone's organization out of making him hand over a cut from his profits. Sure, he could argue his way out of it again. Hell, hadn't he and Mike been old-time pals.

**THE THIRD MALONE HENCH-**MAN, Frank Adamo, a catlike, light-stepping gunman whose mouth twitched nervously, came in when the place was almost deserted. With scarcely a word to Trauber, he joined the first two.

Tight-spot Andrews suddenly realized that something was doing. The three men were obviously waiting for the night club to become entirely empty. Andrews was about to formulate a plan of leaving the place and returning, somehow, through a window, to watch, when Sauchelli suddenly turned and peered in his direction. Tight-spot drew back farther into the shadows of his booth. But then he saw that it was too late—he had been spotted.

The three gunmen talked together for a minute or two out of sight, scarcely moving lips. Then De Carlo lifted his rumbling weight from his chair and walked carelessly to the newshawk's booth. With feigned surprise he pretended to discover suddenly the reporter from the *Dial*.

"Well, if it isn't our great big newspaper hero. Come on over and have a drink with us. The boys'll be glad to see you tonight."

"No, thanks, De Carlo," Andrews replied lazily, then added: "I'm leaving soon, anyway."

The gunman's heavy face was rutted with smiles, but his hand slipped slowly toward a lapel of his coat as he returned slowly, heavily: "Oh—no, you're not—big boy. We—like your company."

For a moment the reporter did not move. Things were beginning to look bad. He should have gone out earlier, as he'd contemplated, and returned from the rear some way to watch from a safe, hidden vantage point.

"Oh, all right," he said finally, shrug-



ging, "since it will please the boys so much."

Adamo greeted Andrews with mock heartiness, but the gimlet-eyed Sauchelli merely nodded coldly and gestured toward a chair. Andrews sat down. De Carlo filled a glass for him from a bottle in the center of the table.

"What's up, boys?" the reporter asked after several long, silent moments.

The three eyed him slowly, and then De Carlo said: "Nothing—nothing at all, Tight-spot. Just takin' it easy, having a few drinks. Why, we like to have you with us tonight." He paused, then added: "Besides, what if something is up? Ain't you Tight-spot Andrews, who says he can always figger a way out?"

Andrews made no reply, but he was thinking swiftly, desperately—and finding no way out. He felt sure that there was something up, and that since he had seen and recognized the three, something else would be up: his own number. After whatever was coming off came off, or even just before it, his life wouldn't be worth a wooden nickel.

Gracie, the cigarette girl, passed by, dressed for the street. But Andrews saw by her face that she was entirely unaware of the situation. He could hope for no help from her. She had given him the steer for which he had asked her. She obviously thought he wanted the present situation. With a brief smile she was gone.

John Andrews' heart sank. He hadn't thought any way out of this spot—yet. He smiled slightly, cynically, and thought: "Tight-spot Andrews—huh, what a swan song!"

Adamo saw the smile and asked: "Enjoyin' yourself at last, eh, Tight-spot?"

"No!" Andrews flared back, angrily. Then he was on his feet, starting out of the place.

Sauchelli and Adamo glanced swiftly around, hands darting gunward, noticing that although Trauber was just shoeing out the last of his tipsey customers, waiters and bus boys were still working around the place. Then De Carlo had the reporter's arm in a viselike grip.

"Now—be a sport, Tight-spot," De

Carlo was saying. "The party ain't finished yet. We gotta finish this hottle. Sit down and I'll show you a little trick, make a little bet with you."

John Andrews allowed himself to be slowly shoved down on his chair, realizing that the gang didn't want to give him the works with any witnesses around. Just what the works would be—he wondered.

Silent until now, but watchful, Sauchelli suddenly called out: "Come here, Trauber, we want you in on this party, too—until the joint is cleared."

**E**RNIE TRAUBER came over to the table, his big frame, which dwarfed even De Carlo's size, moving stiffly. He stopped the nervous tightening of his heavy jaws with an effort. Before he could speak, Sauchelli added:

"And your hood, too."

Trauber hesitated, then turned and heekoned his floorman over.

Sauchelli moved back from the table so he could face both squarely, and his hand rested significantly inside his coat.

"You can't buck this outfit, so he good," he said. "We're too strong."

Andrews could see that from the floorman, at least, there would be no trouble. A cheap little gunman in a theatrical dinner jacket, his face was paling with abject fear.

"Now, we'll all enjoy the little trick Tony's gonna do to keep Tight-spot amused until everybody else is outta this joint."

De Carlo grinned with the pleased happiness of a man who loves to show off, as he said: "Well, I guess it'll be the good ol' dollar bill and glass and nickel trick."

He placed an empty tumbler on a dollar bill laid flat on the table; then he carefully balanced a nickel on the rim of the glass.

"How much you bet, Tight-spot, that you get the dollar out without touchin' the glass, and without knockin' the nickel off the edge?"

Andrews shrugged. He didn't know the trick; he wasn't interested in the trick; he was interested only in saving his skin.

"Oh, couple of sawbucks," he said. "I'll bet a couple of sawbucks you can't do it. I can't figure any way. You might just happen to miss. I figure my odds are better that way."

De Carlo grinned. Carefully, without touching the glass, he rolled an end of the bill against the glass. Holding the ends of the roll between thumbs and forefingers of both hands, and still without touching the glass, he kept rolling the dollar. He did this slowly, evenly, forcing the tumbler to move smoothly along the bill until clear of it, on the table cloth, and with the coin still balanced.

Andrews accidentally moved a knee against the table, and the nickel tinkled down inside the tumbler.

"Okay," he said quickly, "you win. That was an accident."

The reporter started to reach inside his coat for his wallet.

"Hold it, Andrews!" Sanchelli snapped, and glanced around the now empty room. "Frisk him, Tony."

Tony did, said: "He's clean, Joe."

"Okay, now ease the joint, Tony. And make sure everybody's gone."

They all remained silent, motionless, until De Carlo returned and reported that, "The joint is like a graveyard, boss," and laughed raucously.

Frank Adamo laughed, too, and his laugh was even more significant than De Carlo's.

Trauber's face had become stoical, impassive. But his floorman was cringing visibly, although he was silent—knowing that anything he could say could never change whatever was slated to come.

Sanchelli's automatic was out now as he ordered: "Tony, do your stuff—the way I told you."

Andrews watched Tony's face turn from a smirk to a sullen scowl as he frisked Trauber and his lieutenant, showing the guns into his side pockets. Then De Carlo herded them both into the night-club owner's office, where he turned on a radio—loud.

Andrews thought to himself: "They're getting ready fast, and I haven't thought of a way out of this one."

Adamo grinned evilly, got up and walked across the club to its entrance. He pulled aside an inch or two of lowered blind and stood there looking out.

Sanchelli kept his automatic lazily covering Andrews, who watched De Carlo, Trauber and the floorman come out of the office. Trauber stopped beside Gracie's glass-enclosed cigarette stand, the fat roll of the night's take held in one hand.

"All right," De Carlo was saying, "hand over fifteen per cent of the night's business. I'll count it out."

Trauber glared and shouted: "Malone can't do this to me—we're old pals!"

De Carlo didn't say a word, but his scowling face and steady gun muzzle—his very silence—spoke more than words.

**B**OILING ANGER welled up in Ernie Trauber, and a slow flush of rage crept up the big man's bull-like neck. Even through a red haze of fury, he tried to reason with himself to pay the cut to the outfit against which it would be impossible for him to pit himself. But anger won out. . . .

Craftily, Trauber held out the money. De Carlo reached, but before his gun-free hand could touch the money, Trauber dropped it to the floor and darted behind the cigarette stand. At the same time, the dapper little floorman started to duck.

Tony De Carlo was quick for such a big man. He snapped a quick shot that took the little gunman in the throat and laid him out dead on the floor on his back. Ernie Trauber was making a plunging dive toward the inside of the show case, and De Carlo's gun roared again.

A tiny hole appeared in Trauber's forehead. But the big man's dive had already commenced. He kept going, his clawed, outstretched hand seeking the gun hidden among the cigarettes and cigars inside the show case. There was a crash of broken glass, and Trauber lay still; his right fist, clutching a handful of cigars, was poked through a jagged hole in the front glass of the case.

The radio blared on, an ironic blanket of sound for exploding cartridges.

De Carlo picked up the fallen money, then glanced back at the cigarette stand. He saw Trauber's grotesquely grinning face and the outstretched hand holding the cigars. The show-off in De Carlo was irrepressible.

Grinning, he plucked a cigar from the hand and said, "Thanks, pal," and then, noticing a streak of blood on the cigar, he threw it away and spat after it in disgust.

"Cut the horseplay," came Sauchelli's sharp voice. "Come here with that drink."

De Carlo brought the money over to the table, where Sauchelli had calmly sat and watched the double murder, keeping Andrews covered at the same time.

Again De Carlo's smirk turned to a scowl, and he said: "Okay to give this damn scribbler the works now, eh, Joe?"

"No, you fool," came Sauchelli's quick reply. "Why do you think I didn't do that already. This has just gotta be a regular gang killin'. It'd raise too much stink to have a reporter's stiff found here—and I don't aim to have no corpse ridin' around with us. We'll tie him up, hold his nose an' make him drink plenty whisky, till he's good an' drunk. Then we'll just have a good 'live drunk in the car—in case. . . . We'll take care of him later."

Tight-spot Andrews had been doing a lot of thinking during the past few minutes, reviewing in his mind detail after detail concerning the lives of these men, searching desperately for some way out of this, his tightest spot yet. Somehow, his eyes had returned, time and again, to the nickel in the glass on the table in front of him. That glass with which De Carlo had done his trick, and the nickel inside it, seemed to hold some solution to his tight spot. Then, quite suddenly he remembered that other glass with that other nickel in it. . . .

De Carlo, grinning again, started toward the man from the *Dial*.

"Hold it!" Andrews suddenly snapped.

The unexpected imperativeness of the reporter's tone halted De Carlo. Sau-

chelli did no more than nod to De Carlo to continue to do a good job of knocking out the newsmen. But Andrews' next words stirred fiery, fierce interest in Joe Sauchelli's eyes.

"Sauchelli—you'd like to know who murdered your brother, wouldn't you?"

De Carlo fell back a pace and looked questioningly at Sauchelli, who said: "You—better have something to say—or I'll use a knife on you." His voice rose thinly, cruelly: "I'll—I'll cut your damned heart out!"

Tight-spot Andrews pointed calmly to the nickel in the glass, saying: "That glass with the nickel in it suddenly reminded me of another glass with a nickel in it—and that other was found in the room with your brother Luigi's body."

Sauchelli's face was contorted with emotion, and he was speechless.

De Carlo said, "Say, you tryin' to—" and stopped quite suddenly.

Frank Adams had now come away from his post at the entrance, and he was listening intently a few paces off.

**F**INALLY SAUCHELLI snarled: "Why, you damn punk, you can't try to fool me. I searched every inch of that room, looking for something the fool cops mighta missed. There wasn't no glass in the room with no nickel in it."

Andrews leaned forward, fixing Sauchelli with intent eyes, and said: "The police removed the glass before you came. You see, they took some things down to headquarters for special fingerprinting other than what was done around the room."

Joe Sauchelli looked queerly at De Carlo.

"Joe, you don't think I coulda—" De Carlo gasped, and got no further as fear lumped his throat.

Adams came closer on catlike feet, a strange, tense look in his eyes.

"I know, De Carlo," Andrews was saying. "a thousand guys probably know that glass trick. However, who else did Luigi know that did that trick?"

Andrews knew he was only shooting in the dark, and he waited tensely.

De Carlo paled at sight of Sauchelli's

blazing eyes, and gulped: "It's this damn scribbler's trick. Joe, that ain't no proof—that ain't no proof."

"You sure you wasn't there, Tony?" Sauchelli asked, icily.

"No, Joe, I wasn't there—I wasn't there."

Andrews noticed that Frank Adamo's mouth was twitching more than usual; that the man's face was drawn.

"I know that ain't no real proof," Sauchelli said, thoughtfully, "but there's a chance you were there that night—an' not in Philly. Maybe you an' Luigi had a fight over somethin'. I dunno about the nickel in the glass, but maybe I oughta—Say, it seems to me that you were pretty sore that time my brother got a bigger cut on a job than you did."

Tony De Carlo's face looked as if it would never smirk again, as he begged: "No—Joe, don't give it to me just on a thing like that. I was there, Joe, but I never done it. I tell you what I saw. . . ."

Joe Sauchelli's eyes were filled with a deadly belief that he had found his brother's murderer.

"Put your hands on the table, Tony," he said, coldly.

De Carlo's trembling hands came up, away from Trauber's and the floorman's guns he had put in the side pockets of his coat.

"Stalling now, eh, Tony?" Sauchelli said, sneering. "Gonna make up a story about somethin', eh?"

"Better hear what he's got to say, Sauchelli, before you shoot," Andrews advised.

The expression on Frank Adamo's face was changing from tense anger to puzzlement, to anger again.

"Yeah—Hsten, Joe," De Carlo pleaded, "I went up to see Luigi—I got back from Philly ahead of time—an' I see a guy come sneakin' out of the apartment. So I duck into that dark corner of the hall, an' I watch. He wipes his fingerprints off the knob of the front door an—"

Frank Adamo stepped a pace nearer and interrupted with: "You don't say, Tony. Did you see who he was?"

De Carlo looked up into Adamo's eyes, which were fixed on him like those of a snake, and stammered: "No—no I didn't get a very good look at him. . . . I got into the apartment through a window from the fire escape. I saw that Luigi was dead. I didn't tell Joe because I didn't want to get mixed up in any trouble with him not believin' me—or somethin'."

"You are goin' to tell me who that man was," came Sauchelli's icy tones. "I think you're lyin'."

Andrews suddenly leaned forward and said: "I hinted at it before, when I asked De Carlo if Luigi knew anybody else, personally, who did the glass trick. Perhaps—ah, Adamo learned it from De Carlo. There was a glass in that room, a glass with a nickel fallen into it."

Adamo started forward, viciously. But Sauchelli stopped him with a significant movement of his automatic.

"Tony," said Sauchelli with deadly chill, "you're acting too damned scared and yellow. Somebody killed Luigi for that big cut he got, and I know you were sore 'cause he got so much more'n you."

THE MUZZLE of Sauchelli's gun rose a trifle, centering more perfectly on De Carlo's heart.

De Carlo hesitated, then hurst out: "I ain't never ratted before, but you ain't gonna give it to me for nothin', Joe. I know who done it. Frank done it! He's the guy I saw coming out of Luigi's room."

Frank Adamo leaped to one side, cat-like, hand clawing for his gun. Joe Sauchelli alighted to one knee from his chair and pulled trigger. Then the air was filled with the thunder of both men's guns.

Tight-spot Andrews hacked swiftly away from the table. De Carlo, caught between two fires, grabbed spasmodically at a shoulder when he was hit; then he slumped to the floor. The reporter saw Adamo stagger and fall, mouth gushing blood, after Sauchelli's fourth shot. Desperately, the reporter launched his long body in a tackle at De Carlo.

The newshawk's shoulder hit the table, and it skidded across the dance floor and crashed against a pillar. But Andrews' outflung hands seized the wounded De Carlo, and the reporter pulled the racketeer's body up and over. Using it as a shield, he struggled to his feet.

Joe Sauchelli's automatic spat—once, twice. Andrews felt the thudding impact of bullets tearing into De Carlo's big body. Then he hurled the weight from him, straight at Sauchelli.

Sauchelli went down under De Carlo's big body, and Andrews threw himself at both of them, fists flailing. Those fists were wasted on De Carlo, as Tight-spot found out afterwards, but one hefty swing put Sauchelli out for a good ten minutes—long enough for the *Dial* man to telephone the police and for them to arrive. . . .

Much later that morning, Tight-spot Andrews and Captain of Detectives, Bert James were drinking coffee and munching rolls in a dog wagon. Both were well pleased—although the captain was a bit irate because Andrews had been taking undue delight in holding out on him

about the mystery of the glasses with the nickels in them.

Captain James growled: "Come on, sorehead, just because I haven't had a chance to read your old newspaper story, why hold out on a fella?"

John Andrews smiled and explained: "When I went up to Lnigi's apartment with Lieutenant Doyle, it happened that neither he nor the boys with him had a nickel to feed the pay phone in the hall to get the corpse doc and the fingerprint crew. I was fumbling with my change, and I dropped one of my nickels in a glass that happened to be on a table. He wouldn't let me fish it out for fear of disturbing any prints. I remember looking down at it and making a wisecrack about somebody getting graft. Somehow, at the Red Parrot, my memory kept asking me where I had ever before seen a glass with a nickel in the bottom of it. Foolish—but then I have a theory that similarities—"

The captain broke in with: "All right, all right, John—just let it go that that great crackpot, Tight-spot Andrews, got out of another impossible jam."



# One Hunch to Hell



*By Richard A. Vigil*

**¶** *The newspapers called it a monkey farm. But Detective Orville Orr found it to be an Alibi for the Grim Reaper—with himself a target for the Devil's marksman.* **¶**



**T**HE sign on the frosted glass of the corridor door was painted in small, black letters. It bore the following inscription:

**ORR & ORR**  
**DETECTIVE AGENCY**  
*Scientific Criminal Investigators*

Inside the small office, Catherine was saying, "I'm afraid for him. I don't know why, hut—I just feel something might happen."

Orville Orr grinned at his wife across the wide expanse of his desk. "Nonsense," he admonished. "Nelson knows how to

take care of himself. If anything were wrong, he'd have called us."

The blond, petite Catherine wasn't convinced. She hit her underlip, went around the desk and sat on Orr's lap.

"You don't understand," she argued. "He's already found this formula; he discovered it this past month. It's proved successful in all the monkey experiments. It's certain it'll prove successful on humans."

Orr—hard-bitting, dark-haired and wiry—gazed at her patiently. She was referring to one of their best friends. But Orr already knew Dr. Nelson had discovered a specific therapy for the treating of cholera.

"Please!" Catherine begged. "At least

call him. Something must have happened or he wouldn't have broken that luncheon appointment."

Orr scowled but reached for the phone and got an out-of-town number. The scowl disappeared from his face as an excited voice came over the wire.

Catherine stared at him.

"Your hunch was right," Orr swore. "Culler just found Dr. Nelson dead in his room. Thinks a monkey bit him and that he died of cholera." He added tensely: "We're going out there."

**D**R. NELSON'S RESIDENCE—the papers called it a monkey farm—was outside the city limits. It was a comfortable, two-story stone structure. Behind it was a wire-covered, tropical-like garden where the monkeys were kept.

Orville Orr parked his coupé behind a large sedan, and he and Catherine got out. A bony, red-faced youth ran out of the house to meet them. He was Vic Culler, Dr. Nelson's handy man.

"It is cholera!" he cried. "Dr. Torgerson says it is." He led the two newcomers into the house.

In the front room were two grave-faced men. One was Dr. Torgerson—a small, fussy, pot-bellied individual—who had been working on the cholera experiments with Nelson. The second man—husky, blond-haired and clad in a leather jacket and corduroy trousers—was Dennis Spight. He was Torgerson's assistant.

"No doubt about it," Torgerson revealed fussily. "It's cholera—the disease we were fighting."

Orr quickly gathered the main facts. Vic Culler had got the day off. He'd come in about twenty minutes ago and had found Dr. Nelson dead in his bedroom. Two large monkeys were in there. There had been a struggle inside; Nelson had undoubtedly been attacked by them.

"They jumped me, too," Culler added. "I had to kill both."

"Culler phoned us and then you called," Dennis Spight offered nervously.

Orr and Catherine exchanged glances. She asked Vic Culler: "When did you see Dr. Nelson last—alive?"

The youth swallowed. "I—it was yesterday noon, when I fed the monkeys."

Orr asked Torgerson: "Can we go see the body?"

The doctor looked at his watch. "If you want; but just for a moment," he replied uneasily. "I'm having the room disinfected. Too much risk of an epidemic starting."

He led the way up the stairs, turned right. There was a door at the left in the hallway. Torgerson said:

"The room's got a strong gas, so take a long breath before you look inside." He threw the door open.

Orr drew back horrified at sight of the dead man. Catherine, behind him, gasped.

Nelson—a middle-aged, bald-headed man—lay curled up on the bed, fully dressed. His lips were blackish-blue, his face ghastly pale.

The room itself showed signs of a struggle, as had been said. The two monkeys—large, black-faced specimens—were sprawled out dead before the bed. Culler had shot both.

Torgerson closed the door, and they started down the stairway. Several men were coming in through the front door: the county coroner, the sheriff and several others.

Orr and Catherine spoke to them briefly and went outside. They got into their small coupé to wait. They knew there'd be little to be learned in the house just now. As Torgerson had said, they were running the risk of contracting the fatal and very infectious disease.

Orr gazed grimly at his wife. "You don't by any chance think it's—murder, Catherine?"

"I wish I could be sure. If it is murder, it's so clever that we'll probably never prove it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Catherine said tensely. "You know Dr. Nelson was to get a hundred and twenty thousand dollars from a foreign government if he discovered a worthy therapy for cholera. It's a problem on which a number of prominent doctors all over the world have been working."

Orr's lips thinned. "There's a motive

in that all right, Nelson was working with Torgerson. Torgerson was to get forty per cent if they succeeded."

**B**EFORE them now, Dr. Torgerson and Spight were coming toward their sedan. Orr honked, calling the potbellied doctor. He asked him:

"Now that Nelson's dead, what becomes of the formula?"

"I don't know," Torgerson said worriedly. "Nelson hid it somewhere, but I don't know where. Naturally I'm interested; I'm to get money out of it. I worked with Nelson for the past two years on the thing."

"What about Mr. Spight?" Catherine asked softly.

"He'll get ten per cent of what I get," the doctor said, slightly annoyed. "He's just been with me five months, but I promised him that."

He glanced toward Spight, then joined him. Both got in their car and drove off.

"Now about this Vic Culler?" Orr murmured.

"He looks innocent enough," Catherine ventured. "But of course—"

She hesitated. The skinny county coroner was coming toward them. He whined out troubledly:

"We gotta be careful of this cholera disease."

"How do you think Dr. Nelson contracted the disease?" Catherine inquired.

"From them monkeys, lady. Got bitten by 'em. The two that were in his room were the two that had the germs."

Orr frowned. "How'd the monkeys ever get up into his room?"

"Oh, that's possible. That Culler kid says he sometimes had 'em around his lab downstairs. They just went on up the stairs. Monkeys are smart little creatures."

Orr nodded. The explanation was possible, but he still wasn't satisfied. After the coroner and his men left, taking the body, he asked Catherine:

"How long does it take for a person to die of cholera?"

"From what I remember," she said, "it might be a few hours—or days."

He stared fixedly toward his dead

friend's house, eyes troubled and thoughtful. If it just wasn't for the formula part now, he would have agreed with the others. He would have let the case pass on as a terrible accident, due to Nelson's carelessness.

"Say!" he exclaimed suddenly. "What's that smoke?"

Quickly he got out and ran down the sidewalk and around the side of the house, with the startled Catherine following. From behind, Orr had seen trails of smoke go up into the late afternoon sky.

The weird chattering of excited monkeys came from the gardens now. Turning at the rear of the house, Orr stopped shortly.

Vic Culler was piling wood on a large fire. He whirled frightenedly.

"What's the idea?" Orr demanded.

"Why, I—I'm going to destroy these two dead monkeys," Culler explained. He indicated a gunny sack at his side. "Mr. Spight said I should. They're infected. Dr. Nelson was experimenting with 'em."

"You'd better go," Orr said grimly. "We'll take care of the monkeys."

A slow smirk crossed the youth's face. "Suit yourself," he said. He hurried to a hattered flivver behind a gate by the monkey gardens; then he was driving off.

The fire was now going out; Orr threw dirt on it. Some twenty yards behind him, in the monkey gardens, the little jungle beasts were whimpering and jumping around their large cages.

"Sorry, fellas," Orr grinned at them grimly, "but we're going to have to take your two dead pals to town."

**I**T was late that night when Catherine Orr looked up from her microscope. Stretching a little, she said, tiredly:

"That's the last of it. There's an undue amount of the *Vibrio* coma in the blood of these monkeys. Then their skins are punctured in several places—and not from bites or bruises."

Orr came to his feet, eyes hardening.

"Some one must have infected the disease into 'em! Nelson never did; he always let 'em get it much as a human would—through contaminated food or water." He tapped a thick medical book.



"Then it says here this cholera *Vibrio* seldom if ever invades the blood stream."

Catherine nodded. "Yes, and another thing is, the disease gains entrance by way of the gastro-intestinal tract. That would mean we should have found cholera germs in the mouths. But my findings there are all negative."

Muscles knotted in Orr's throat. He knew now that if the two monkeys had been given cholera germs by Nelson, his specific therapy had made them immune to the disease. And they would have had the germs in the intestinal tract—not the blood. He said tonelessly:

"The more I think of this, the more I believe it's murder." Seething rage rode his brain with the thought. "And if it is murder," he went on bitterly, "we've got to prove it!"

Half an hour later, they were back at the dead Dr. Nelson's monkey farm. The night was moonless, ominously dark. They went around the house to the monkey garden.

Catherine had learned the cage number of the dead animals earlier in the day. They neared the place now, hoping for a new lead.

Catherine suddenly stopped dead still. She grabbed Orr's arm, whispered: "I—I think some one's coming!"

From behind the garden, there was the faint but unmistakable sound of footsteps. Abruptly, as though warned by this, the caged monkeys began a frantic, maddening chatter. Orr gave silent thanks that he and Catherine had driven in without lights; that they'd made little noise.

Some ten yards away from them now, a low voice ground out angry curses. The footsteps continued.

Straining his eyes, Orr saw a shadow go toward the two-story house. The intruder faded into the blackness. Behind, the monkeys ceased their jabbering; became sepulchrally silent.

Then, from the direction of the towering mass of darkness that was the house, there came the *whack-whack* sounds of something striking dirt.

"He must be digging," Catherine breathed fearfully into her husband's ear.

"We'll see," Orr breathed back tightly.

He waited for what was at least ten minutes, while the digging continued. Then, as it stopped, he slid forward. Catherine followed.

Orr, gun and flashlight now out, kept moving. But just as he was about to snap the light, his foot caught over something—the pile of unburned wood with which Vic Culler was going to destroy the monkeys.

There was a loud, cracking snap. Orr's foot had crushed a stick. He instinctively stumbled forward, half jumping to prevent his falling.

Before him, the unknown newcomer was darting toward the side of the house. Simultaneously a gun was roaring thunderous flame in his hand.

Catherine screamed. Orr dropped, blazing back at the fleeing shadow. He dared not turn on his light, for fear of offering too good a target.

And then something struck him on the temple with savage impact; lightning seemed to dance madly in his skull. Then he was going down into a pit of horrible nothingness.

HE came to with the screeching cries of the terrified monkeys in his ears. Some one was shaking him, saying:

"Oh, darling, are you hurt? Are you hurt?"

Orr sat erect. Catherine wiped blood from his cheek and head.

"I—I'm all right," he said dazedly. "You?"

"I lost my head," she sobbed. "I—I couldn't help screaming."

He felt his head. The bullet had grazed his right temple.

"What became of him?"

"He got away," Catherine explained. "Drove off in a car he had parked down the road. I got your gun and fired back—but I'm sure I missed."

Orr stood up, and he and Catherine went to the side of the house. He flashed his light on the spot where the other had dug.

"Don't get too close!" Orr warned.

Dug against the side of the house, was a hole about two feet deep. Around it

TDA

in spots, the dirt was slightly tamped, as though with wires. But what caught Orr's eye was a small, ironclad box at the bottom of the hole—chained to several water pipes.

"Dr. Nelson's formula!" Orr gasped. "That's what the fellow who came here wanted. It's beginning to look more and more like murder." He turned to his wife. "What did that car sound like?"

"I didn't hear it very well, for worrying about you. But it didn't sound like Culler's car."

"He could have used another one," Orr said.

He stared wonderingly at the ironlike box. It was the same size as a nickel match box, but the padlock under one of its rungs was nearly twice as large. Orr kept staring at this and the freshly dug dirt. Then an icy thought struck his brain, and he snapped:

"We've got to act quick, Catherine. I think I know how we can get this guy."

He led Catherine to the front of the house. "This isn't exactly legal," he announced, "but we can't take time to be too careful!"

With his gun muzzle, he poked a hole in a window, turned the window-latch. He went in and made three phone calls. Coming back out quickly, he said:

"One was to Vic Culler. He lives at the Lincoln Hotel in Carbondale, about three miles away from here. Hotel operator says he ain't in. I called Dr. Torgerson's house—it's about two miles down the road—and he's not in. Spight, who lives with him, says he's in town on business. I also got the sheriff."

"What do you plan to do?" Catherine asked tremulously.

"I'm going to round up everybody. They should be here within forty-five minutes."

THE SHERIFF, bringing two deputies, came first. "Wait here with my wife," Orr ordered. "I'll be back soon."

They were waiting for him, impatiently, when he got back—Dr. Torgerson, Dennis Spight, and Vic Culler, together with the county lawmen.

Catherine had turned on the lights of

the coupé, and everyone stood before these.

"See here, Orr," Torgerson rapped. "You can't keep us here. I had important business in town; the sheriff brought me here much against my will."

"You were in town," Orr cut in, voice edged. "And you, Spight?"

"Why, I was home, reading." Dennis Spight shuffled his feet uneasily.

"I don't have to believe that," Orr commented. "What about you, Culler?"

The red-faced youth had trouble speaking. "I—I had stepped out to buy a paper when you called. The sheriff got me, too. I—I don't know what this is all about!"

"Well, tell us, Orr," muttered the hurly sheriff. "Your wife says yuh got somethin' important."

"Yes, sheriff," Orr began, "it is important. Dr. Nelson didn't just die accidentally. He was murdered!"

There was a stunned silence. Then Torgerson cried thickly: "Murdered! Ah—why that's insane, man! What proof have you?"

"I've got proof," Orr said, voice steely.

His eyes drilled into the three suspects; watched every move they made.

"Yes," he went on. "Nelson finally found this specific therapy for the cure and immunizing of cholera. You, Torgerson, and Spight, were to share in the prize money from the foreign government. Culler here was just working for wages. Then one of you got greedy—and killed him."

Questions and oaths leaped to the others' mouths. Orr held up his hand.

"One of you injected cholera germs in those two monkeys. The idea was to make it look as though they'd bitten him and given him cholera. The thing backfired. Nelson died from cholera all right, but he didn't get it from a monkey bite. One of you slipped him the disease, in a very clever but simple way."

"Being kind of old and having been given a large dosage, the infection was extremely severe." Orr's tone took on a harder vibrancy. "He died before he could help himself or before he could get help!"

"You—you can prove all that?" Vic Culler stammered.

"Yes. Tonight the killer came back. He's somehow or other found out where the cholera formula was. But when he got his hands on it, he found it was locked to waterpipes. I know who that man is."

Spight eyed Torgerson and Culler suspiciously. "Who is it?" he asked.

"It's you," Orr harked. "Culler's killing the monkeys wrecked your scheme; they wouldn't have showed postmortem signs of cholera. So you told him to burn 'em. They wouldn't have showed signs anyway; they'd been immunized. You didn't—Take him, sheriff!"

AT those startling words, Spight had moved back, then darted toward the dark. But one of the sheriff's two men, surprisingly fleet-footed, tripped him. Snarling, he tried to fight back. He was quickly handcuffed.

"I—I don't have anything to do with this," Torgerson wheezed.

"No, I don't think you do," Orr said. "He worked at it alone. He wanted to hog the formula for himself."

Spight babbled out a curse. "You can't prove anything."

Orr pulled out a carefully wrapped bottle. "Wine," he said. "This was in your room." He smiled at Torgerson. "I took the liberty of checking this with your microscope, Doc. The wine's loaded with cholera germs."

"Why, yes!" Torgerson cried at Spight. "You did give him a drink of that yesterday. He was pretty tired, and you said that would pep him up. It killed him instead, eh?"

"And he's the man that tried to dig out the formula from the side of the house," Orr said. "A check-up of his fingernails will show the dirt under 'em matches that alongside the house."

Spight cursed savagely, jeered: "Yeah, Yeah, you got me all right. Don't rub it in. But if it hadn't been for you, wise guy, these other punks wouldn't have figured it."

The sheriff jerked him away angrily. "We got it figured now," he growled.

Alone with Catherine and Torgerson later, Orr said: "About Nelson's share on this formula—I think we'd better turn it over to some hospital for research purposes."

"Good idea," Torgerson agreed. "He would have probably done that himself."

Catherine slipped her arm under her husband's. She said, "Darling, I still can't understand how you tagged Spight."

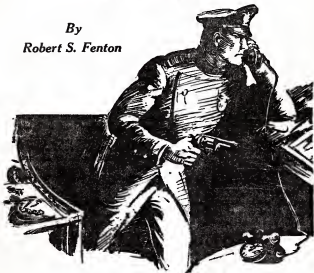
"Those wirelike impressions on the dirt around that hole he dug," Orr explained. "Only one thing could have done that—corduroy pants. I noticed that's what Spight was wearing this afternoon. In his hurry to get his fingers on the formula, he knelt in several spots. He left knee marks. The fool tagged himself!"



*Baseball and murder are strange bedfellows. Detective Jim Toller knew that they didn't mix well. And that made him one up on the killer. For the killer had yet to learn that . . .*

# You Can't Mince Homicide

By  
Robert S. Fenton



**D**ETEKTIVE JIM TOLLER was half asleep. Out of the radio cabinet on the table near his elbow boiled the voice of an excited mike rager, but his words barely registered on the headquarters man's soporific brain.

"—Last of the eighth. It's the Blues at bat, fans. They've got the only run of the game and this one run looks bigger every minute. This game means the pennant for whoever finishes out in front. Big

Joe Waltham is up there swinging his big bat and the crowd is still making a lot of noise. Beginning to rain a little harder now—"

Jim Toller had wanted to see that game between the Centralis Blues and the Midville Mudhens. He guessed that about everybody in Centralis had gone to that night baseball game over in Midville. The town had been baseball crazy for a week. But Jim Toller had had a tough day of

it trying to get the goods on a pair of hot-car dealers. He yawned, stretched and reached out to turn the radio on louder.

"—Raining pretty hard now. There are no covered stands here in Midville, but the crowd doesn't seem to mind about getting wet."

Jim Toller idly reached out for a paper. Headlines barked at him:

**FATHER'S MONEY SAVES PLAYBOY  
FROM JAIL**

*Manlaughter Charge Against Young  
Manther Dismissed*

*Case Settled Out of Court*

The detective smirked. Like most of the people in Centralia he had been hoping that Ted Manther would get the limit. The story had inflamed the citizens of the small metropolis for weeks. Young Manther had been in plenty of trouble long before running over and killing a child in the street. Jim Toller had been at police headquarters when Manther had been brought in. The millionaire manufacturer's son had had no recollection of having hit anybody—he had been that drunk. A burly policeman had beaten a lot of the liquor fumes out of the playboy's brain that night, and Jim Toller had itched for a chance to get in a few punches of his own. Outside the jail a crowd had gathered yelling for young Manther's blood.

Jim Toller threw the paper aside and mumbled: "That kind of guy would get off. Been somebody like me—" He stretched, fell back in his chair and the voice issuing from the radio gradually grew fainter in his ears.

"—Raining pitchforks here now. Last of the ninth. The Mudhens have two more men coming up. Lefty Hoyt's got one out. Only two more and the Blues win the pennant, fans."

Jim Toller was asleep. The insistent ringing of the telephone woke him up almost an hour later. He glanced at the clock, forcibly banishing the sleep from his eyes, and reached for the jangling phone. The hands of the clock said eleven-fifteen as he barked: "Hello?" into the transmitter.

"Headquarters calling, Jim? We've

been ringin' for five minutes. Car's on the way there now to pick you up," a gruff voice ran on. "Nohody hut T. J. Manther's been humped off. Yeah—Roy Manther found him when he got back from the hall game. Looks like that no-good rat of a brother of his got himself into a real jam this time."

Detective Toller hanged the phone onto its cradle, snatched up his topcoat and hat from where he had thrown them hours before, and went out of his little flat on the double. A police car was crowding toward the curb when he got out into the street. While it was still rolling the detective climbed in and fell into the back seat between two hurly cops.

"Big stuff!" he cracked.

"You won't need to do much snoopin'," one of the cops said. "Y'know that Manther kicked the kid outta the house after he got him out of that last mess. Cost him close to fifty grand, I heard. Young Manther's been next to broke an' he got kicked out of his club. Been living in that little caretaker's cottage right near the main road."

"Yeah," Jim clipped, "I guess I won't never get a chance to show the chief anything. The only big bump-off since I turned in my night stick, an' it's all cut an' dried. Nuts!"

**T**HE MANTHERS had a show place three miles outside of Centralia. It was a huge, gabled mansion half hidden by tall pine trees, and from the eminence on which it was built it seemed to look down with disdain upon the rest of the habitations sprawled around it. When the police car climbed the winding road and rolled into the big front yard, Jim Toller saw a long sleek coupé standing in front of the house, its lights still on. The detective eyed the ornamental car with a bit of envy as he followed the cops up to the door.

A tall man in his late thirties opened the door suddenly as they approached. His hat was off and a camel's hair polo coat dangled loosely from his broad shoulders. Roy Manther's face was pale, the whiteness accentuated by the hall

light. Jim Toller had seen him around town a lot. The elder of the two Manther sons was like his father, as different from his brother, Ted, as milk is from wine. He was the son who had been content to go into his father's business and make a go of it.

Jim Toller followed the nod of Roy Manther who said in a tight voice: "In there." All the men went into a large room that was lined with shelves on three sides, all completely filled with books.

A hulky man with iron-gray hair was slumped sideways in his chair, one arm hanging over the arm, fingers just short of touching the rug. There was an ugly hole between his eyes and an unwholesome blue-white pallor to his face. In one corner of the room stood a thin, gaunt man, a soiled terrycloth robe wrapped around him, wide eyes staring at the dead body of the man known to the world as the great "T. Jay."

Detective Toller said to the dead man's son: "You—you've got a pretty good idea who did it, I guess. Sorry to have to speak so bluntly but—"

Young Manther nodded. "He's down there in that cottage near the road. Hasn't hardly drawn a sober breath since we got him out of jail, I went in there. He's lyin' on the bed with the pistol in his hand. He must—have—shot dad from the open window because he was not allowed in the house. He hasn't a key and dad would have seen him if he had tried to get in through that window."

Manther plunged his hands into the pockets of his loosely worn coat, idly took one out and looked at a folded square of pasteboard that it held. Jim Toller took swift notice, saw that it was a score card. He suddenly said:

"Where's the coroner, Mike? He ought to be here."

Roy Manther swore softly, and Toller thought that a little sob came out of his throat. "To think we have to go all through this after what has already happened. He must have sobered up—a little, then came up here to— He was a crack shot with any kind of a gun. He belonged to the gun club in town. He—"

Brakas squealed outside and tires hit into gravel. A few moments later a small, fat man hustled in breathing fussily. The cops stepped aside and let him have room to open his ominous black bag and go to work. Jim Toller knelt down and picked up an unlighted cigar from the floor. It bore mute evidence of the murdered man's mood at the time of his death, for fully two inches of the rich weed had been chewed to shreds.

"He always did that when he was angry or worried about anything," Roy Manther volunteered, speaking of his father.

Before Jim Toller could respond, the coroner made a blunt statement. "Been dead a couple of hours—not more. Looks like a bullet—about a thirty-eight—went into his brain."

The fat little man thrust a pudgy hand into his black bag and pulled out a long, thin, shiny instrument. Toller and two of the cops turned away.

THE CORONER finally snapped his black bag shut, called to Toller. The detective stepped up close. Roy Manther was just behind him.

"The bullet did not go very far into his head. I'd say he wasn't shot from very close up," the medical man said. "A good shot could have stood out beyond the window and nailed him, Toller. That slug would have gone right through his head if a man had stood—say, right here."

Jim Toller looked at Manther, said: "Looks like this won't be much of a case. Your brother could have made a shot like that."

Manther tightened his lips, said: "Yes. You'd better go down to the cottage and pick him up."

Jim Toller said: "If he is as drunk as you say, he'll wait. After he killed his father, he must have gone down there to pack a bag. His nerves were ragged and he took a stiff drink. He took a couple more and then forgot what he had intended to do." He stabbed a finger at the gaunt man who still stood as if mesmerized by the sight of the dead man. "You find the body?"

The servant said: "Beg pardon. I did not catch—"

Roy Manther cut in: "No, I came in, Toller, and saw him like that."

"You mean," the headquarters man shot at the servant, "that you didn't hear a shot?"

The frightened retainer shook his head. "N-no, I did not. I sleep on the third floor and I sleep very heavy, too, sir. Mr. Manther let me retire about nine o'clock. I'm getting quite hard of hearing, sir."

"Any other servants in the house?"

"None," Roy Manther answered. "We discharged the housekeeper a couple of days ago. Incompetent," he added crisply.

"I left for Midville just after dinner. I stopped in to see Ted—my brother down at the cottage—and asked him if he felt in shape to go with me. He growled something about getting thrown out—said he might make it tougher than the old man thought. Anyway he said something that sounded like that. He had a terrible hangover, looked pretty bad."

"Hmm," commented the detective. "He had been tossed out. He needed money, eh? You think that was what he wanted? That because your father wouldn't give it to him, he—"

Roy Manther did not respond. His eyes were on the wall near the front of the house. "Behind those books there," he said, "is a safe. Somebody's been moving the books!"

Jim Toller followed him across the room. Manther yanked some loose books out of the case and dumped them into a chair. In the space thus revealed, the detective saw a small safe door standing open about an inch. The dead man's son swung it wide and plunged a hand into the black depths of the built-in safe. He pulled out a lot of papers and hurriedly examined them.

"There was five thousand dollars in here last night," he said excitedly. "Dad put it there. I brought it home with me." He looked out into the night, his face hard, eyes stormy. "The rat—the no-good rat! I ought to kill him!"

Jim Toller thought awhile. Then he said: "He shot his father first so that there would be no angry outcry to reach

up to where the butler slept. He knew there would be a fuss once his father saw him coming in. When the job was done, he came in through the window and robbed the safe." Toller turned to Manther and a couple of men from headquarters. "Let's go down and take him."

Toller and Roy Manther and the cops went down to the little cottage at the end of the winding driveway in a headquarters car. They found Ted Manther, fully clothed, lying on a bed. There was a whiskey bottle on the floor. Jim Toller found five thousand dollars in his pockets. The gun that had killed the man up at the gabled house was clutched in his hand. Roy Manther lifted him up, cracked the palm of his hand against his brother's face a half dozen times. The drunken man's eyes opened suddenly and he habbled something.

"The dirty louse," a cop said, "too bad they can't give him the chair."

"Why can't they?" Roy Manther ground out. "He—"

Jim Toller nodded, said: "He was drunk. A jury—" He dragged the drunken man off the bed, shook him savagely. "Come on, kid. We're goin' up to the house and show you somethin' nice. Maybe you'll save the state a lot of trouble by telling us everything."

THE CAR went up to the mansion again, and Toller and the cops half dragged Ted Manther inside.

The dead-wagon crew stood waiting for permission to remove the body, but Toller said as he shoved his prisoner toward the corpse: "In just a minute, boys."

Ted Manther gazed at the corpse dully for several moments. Then his brain was shocked free of the numbing fumes of liquor, and he cried out: "He—No! No, he can't be—Where's Roy? Roy!"

"Here I am, you rat!" his brother snarled at him. "Look at what you've done now. This time nothing can save you. He's dead—and you killed him! You hear?"

"N-no!" Ted Manther shuddered and pawed at his pasty face with his free left hand. His red-rimmed eyes were glassy,

but he had been shocked sober. "I—I didn't—I c-couldn't. Oh-h-h, my—"

"Get him out of here!" Jim Toller said tersely. "Book him for murder. I'll be downtown later. Maybe Mr. Manther"—he turned to Roy—"maybe you will drive me back?"

"Of course," Roy Manther said, visibly shaken. "Excuse me for awhile, will you? I—I need a drink myself—right now."

"I should think you would," Jim said. He strode to the window and called out: "Mike, before you go, snap out the lights on that coupé out there, will you?"

He turned back into the room then and watched while the body of T. J. Manther was being placed in the undertaker's basket and carried out. The engine of the dead wagon raged and soon it went out of the grounds, tires crunching gravel.

Jim Toller grinned icily, took a pack of smokes out of his pocket. He selected a cigarette, touched a match to it and sucked sweet smoke into his lungs. It stimulated his brain, a brain that had been working with well-attuned mechanism for the past ten minutes. He crossed the library and picked up the score card that Roy Manther had tossed to the table. He opened it and saw that the Blues had won the game.

"Ha," he chuckled, "I win five bucks!" and he slipped the card into his pocket.

Jim Toller crossed the room again to where the body had been found. He stood looking at the blood-stained chair for several moments, then stooped over and picked up something that had been wedged between the big cushion and the arm of the easy chair. Apparently it had fallen from the dead man's clothes. It was a small chunk of partially charred stuff that the detective pulled at with his fingers. It was wadding, and Toller knew it had come out of a cartridge. But why?

The detective suddenly snapped his teeth together with an audible click and swung around to look at the window. He smiled thinly, crossed the room slowly as Roy Manther came out of the hall.

"If you're ready, Toller," Manther said, "I'll drive you into town." He picked up his hat and went out again.

Jim Toller said, almost unaware of it: "Okay, I'll be right out."

It was five minutes before he left the room. During that time, a lot of loose ends had been gathered in, and Jim Toller nodded grimly as he walked out of the house.

Roy Manther had the engine of his coupé running. He seemed to be a little impatient when Toller got in, and the detective apologized.

"Sorry to put you out like this," he said. "Especially at a time like this."

"Oh, that's all right," the bereaved man replied. "I couldn't stay in that house tonight, anyway. Maybe I won't—ever again, I'd keep seeing him there—like he was—I'll stay at a hotel."

"Pretty terrible when you think of it," Jim Toller remarked as the big coupé went down the winding road to the main highway. "A son killing his own father. Know how you must feel, Manther." He was silent for quite a while after that. Then: "Some game last night. I didn't figure the Blues would cop."

"It was a great game all right," Roy Manther said. "Lefty Hoyt sure mowed down those Mudhen sluggers. But—listen, Toller, would you mind if I don't—talk about it. If I had only stayed home!"

TOLLER nodded amiably, his brain still trying to tell him something. He turned the handle on the side of the door and opened a small window to let in some air. Sparks flew from his cigarette and bit into the driver's face.

"Sorry," said the man from headquarters, taking the cigarette from between his lips. He leaned forward to put it into the ash receiver, but it slipped out of his hands. A sudden, brief hissing sound came from the rubber matting on the floor of the coupé, and Jim Toller looked down, eyes a little wide.

The coupé swung toward the ditch and Toller yelled: "Look out, Manther!"

The driver bore down on the brake pedal. Tires squealed as he swung the wheel sharply and brought the car back onto the macadam. Jim Toller swung his face toward Manther, startled out of his usual calm by the narrow squeak. Roy



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Manther swore and ripped out: "My nerves are shot. Guess there was a little water there on the floor."

Jim Toller said nothing. His nostrils flared, and he sat there with an acrid odor biting up into his brain.

"Sorry to give you that scare, Toller," Manther apologized. "I've been through a lot tonight, y'know."

His passenger nodded, eyeing the floor at his feet. "Some boiler," he commented. "They say these cars can do a hundred, Manther." He gazed ahead at the road unwinding before the wheels of the smoothly running car.

"Yes, it can. Never had it wide open, though," Manther said no more after that until the coupé slid into the cheap section on the outskirts of Centralia. "I suppose I'll have to go to the trial," he said then. "Stand all that nasty mess. I'm glad Mother never lived to see all this hell."

"Money sure ruins a man if he gets too much of it," Jim Toller said abstractedly. "Anythin' can happen to a guy who drinks like your brother. Does things he doesn't know he's doin'. People sure must have taken advantage of him—gamblers, dames—"

"Let's not talk about him," Roy Manther said sharply. "Haven't I been through enough without that?"

"Turn here," the detective said suddenly. "It's a short cut to the station, Manther."

Obediently Roy Manther turned the car through a dark side street. It purred along over four blocks of a wide thoroughfare. Then Jim Toller indicated another turn. Up ahead was a big, white, illuminated globe, and on it was printed in black letters the word **POLICE**. Roy Manther braked the coupé, swung toward the curb and drew to a stop. The plainclothes man went into the station house with Manther at his side. All of the newspaper men in town seemed to be gathered around the sergeant's desk.

"H'lo, Jim," said the officer on duty behind the desk. He nodded to Roy Manther, waited for Toller to explain the man's presence.

(Continued on page 106)

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(Continued from page 104)

"This is Roy Manther, Pat," said Jim. The sergeant's eyes swung toward the prisoner's brother. "Want to see your brother, eh?"

"No," Detective Toller answered for Manther. His next statement electrified his hearers. "He's come to confess to the murder of his father, Pat!"

Roy Manther stiffened as though he had stepped on a live wire, swung startled eyes toward Jim Toller. Newspaper men gaped foolishly at the detective, then surged forward. A cop ripped out: "What did you say, Jim?" as though he could not credit his own hearing.

"He's crazy!" Roy Manther ground out. "The man's out of his mind!"

"Oh, yeah?" the plainclothes man drawled. He pulled the score card out of his pocket and tossed it to the sergeant's desk. "Take a look at that, Pat. It's been filled out with an indelible pencil. And it's not blurred at all."

"I don't get you, Jim," responded Pat.

"No? Well, I was listening to that game over the radio," the detective declared. "It was raining pretty hard from the seventh inning on, over in Midville, and those stands ain't covered. So why didn't this score card get wet, unless a man was sitting in a car when he filled it out? A guy who listened in on the radio like I did. Catch on, Manther? That was a bad slip. You wet indelible lead and it smears."

"I still say you're crazy, Toller," Manther roared. "I can prove I was at that game. I've got a stub to prove it—a rain check. The man at the ticket office spoke to me when I went in. I know him, see? Get him here tomorrow and he'll tell you! What're you trying to pull, Toller?"

JIM TOLLER to the cops. "Watch him close, men," he said, "while I explain to the gentleman what I mean. That score card put the skids under him—pointed out other slips. Sure—he went to the game. It's only twenty miles to Midville, and the road is good. He could get there in that car of his in twenty-five minutes the way he drives. He could buy a ticket, go

(Continued on page 108)

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(Continued from page 105)

inside and get a score card, then leave. They open the gates an hour before the game time up there. He could get back to some spot near his father's house in time to tune in on the game. He figured that out. Sat in his coupé listening and keeping score—with that pencil. Maybe his nerves were on edge and he forgot to take into account what water does to indeleble lead. He didn't know some of the cords he took out of a shell fell on the floorboards of his car."

"That's right, Jim," a burly cop said. "That lead would've smeared if he was writin' out in the rain. It sure was raining nitchforks."

"You can't frame me, Toller!" Roy Manther snarled. "You and your guess-in' game. You'll sweat for this. You'll be walking a beat again before the week's out. Of all the wild, crazy—" Despite his blustering, Roy Manther's upper lip was beaded with sweat and there was a drawn, blue look about the corners of his mouth.

"Oh, I'll tell you more, Manther," Jim Toller hammered the man relentlessly. "You said that your brother came up from the gate-house and killed your father, Mayba. But there was dust on the window sill he was supposed to have climbed through, and it wasn't disturbed! No wonder your father fired the house-keeper. But that wasn't the payoff, Manther. It was the cartridge you fired in that thirty-eight. Yeah—the shell you fired! You had it figured out a long way ahead. You knew an expert pistol shot would be blamed for it—your brother."

"You emptied a lot of cordite out of that shell while you were in that coupé of yours and put wadding in to compensate for it. Then you put the bullet back in it again. That's why the bullet only went inside your father's head a little more than an inch. But you forgot that that wadding came out, too. It proves to me and everybody else that your father was killed by a man who stood close to him! If that pistol had been fired from where you tried to make me believe it had been, the wadding would not have gone right in your father's lap."

(Continued on page 111)

# The Story of 2 MEN who NEEDED CASH



## THIS MAN DOUBTED:

He said: "Yes, I am broke. I am really terribly hard up. I haven't a cent of extra money for anything. I wish I knew where to get some. I haven't a bit of faith in anything. I am a failure and my luck is terrible."

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I send everything you need. You positively don't risk a penny of your money. There is nothing complicated or puzzling about my money-making methods. You will be the judge and decide for yourself if the earnings possibilities are satisfactory. Just give me a chance to explain the facts. It costs you nothing to find out. Send name on coupon or penny postcard. DO IT NOW!

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## THIS MAN ACTED:

He said: "Yes, I need money. I am tired of penny pinching. Your generous offer sounds good to me. It costs nothing to investigate—I have everything to gain. I am going to send my name and find out just what you have to offer me."

## A FEW WEEKS LATER



Now look at these two men as they work on this money. One has a success and the other is a failure. One had the courage to try. One chose just to "penny pinch" and never be able to get it. Look. The man in the car is a success because he was willing to take a chance. He was willing to take a chance to produce. He was willing to take a chance and get the facts. Working now my plan he has made good. Working I would give a check now for your business to get success as a business is getting to make earnings. He believed in my offer. Why don't you, too, investigate!

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(Continued from page 108)

Roy Manther seemed to be shrinking inside his clothes. His demeanor had changed from defiance to panic. Fear was in his eyes now, and the color had receded from his face. In desperation he forced a jerky laugh.

"After you killed your father," Jim Toller said, "you wiped the prints off Ted Manther's gun and carried it down to the cottage to plant it in his hand. You most likely brought him that bottle of whiskey he almost finished, too. You planted some of that money you stole from the safe on him. How much did you keep, Manther? You worked fast. You hurried to where you left your car and drove toward Midville because you knew that traffic would be heavy with all the fans coming home from the game and nobody would think anything about another car coming out of a filling station and heading right back from the direction it had come. You drove right back home, and it took you a little more than an hour. It all figures up by the clock!"

"You left your lights burning in that roadster when you got to the house because you knew what you were going to find. Ordinarily you would have put it in the garage for the night. Anyway, under normal circumstances, you would have turned out the lights. It meant that you had jittery nerves even before you found your father's body. You wanted money, Manther. Some of it quick. The rest when your father's affairs were settled. Come clean, Manther. You think a man with a terrible hangover could have figured all that out? You think that even a crack pistol shot wouldn't have pretty shaky hands after being on a hender for a couple of days? You think he would bother about fixing a shell so that—"

"Dead to rights," a newspaper man clipped suddenly.

Roy Manther broke. He dropped his head in his hands and reeled against the wall.

Jim Toller went on: "I'm guessing he spent a lot of money, too. Not with cheap bookies and gamblers like his brother, but with big-shot cluhmen and society card sharks. He was a rat, too, but he had



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Name.....

Present Position.....

Address.....

his fur polished. Did I figure right, Manther? And here's another angle in case you haven't enough already. I looked at the dial of your radio set in that coupé, and the arrow is turned to that little one-horse Centralia station, WXYB. Now why would you have it turned there with all those big stations putting out nice music? Figured it would be pretty easy hanging it onto your brother—with the rep he's made for himself, huh? Put him in the cooler, Pat. He looks too sick to stand up."

"Damn you! You snooping louse! You—" Roy Manther choked on the epithets he called the detective.

"I bet the commissioner won't call me them names," Jim Toller grinned. "Well, you see you can't always judge a book by its cover, boys!"

The newshawks were already scrambling for possession of two telephone booths. Jim Toller grinned as he leaned against the desk and watched the cops take a fear-ridden man into the cell room and saw them bring a bewildered one out.

"Sometimes things are too obvious even to a dumb dick like me," Jim Toller said to the desk sergeant. "Manther puts that score card right where I can look at it when we get up to the house, Pat. Hands me an alibi and I ain't even asked for it. And how many guys keep score cards? You know, this detective business is a soft racket sometimes, don't you think?"

